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The Soul of Black Opera: W.E.B. Du Bois's Veil and Double Consciousness in William Grant Still's *Blue Steel*

by
Toiya Lister

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in
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Abstract

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois theorized that black peoples were viewed behind a metaphorical "veil" that consisted of three interrelated aspects: the skin as an indication of African Americans' difference from their white counterparts, white people's lack of capacity to see African Americans as Americans, and African Americans' lack of capacity to see themselves outside of the labels white America has given them. This, according to Du Bois, resulted in the gift and curse of "double consciousness," the feeling that one's identity is divided. As African Americans fought for socio-political equality, the reconciliation of these halves became essential in creating a new identity in America by creating a distinct voice in the age of modernity. Intellectuals and artists of the Harlem Renaissance began to create new art forms with progressive messages that strove to uplift the race and ultimately lift the veil. William Grant Still (1895–1978), an American composer of African descent, accomplished this goal in his opera *Blue Steel* (1934) by changing how blackness—defined here as characteristics attributed to and intended to indicate the otherness of people of African or African-American descent—was portrayed on the operatic stage. Still exemplifies what Houston A. Baker called "mastery of form" by presenting double consciousness in the interactions of three characters, Blue Steel, Venable, and Neola, in order to offer a new and complex reading of blackness.

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Chapter One: Introduction

William Grant Still (1895–1978) was an American composer active between 1921 and 1970, almost half a century.[1] Still was mostly known for his instrumental works; however, his primary goal was to become known as an opera composer. In a 1948 letter Still wrote:

> The love of operatic music…was the thing that aroused in me the desire to compose. Everything else that has been done has been only a step toward that end….In 1912 I fell in love with opera and decided to write.[2]

He began self-studying opera at a young age and continued while studying medicine at Wilberforce University. He dropped out of Wilberforce in 1915, never receiving his degree, and moved to Memphis, Tennessee with his new wife, Grace Bundy, and their four children. It was in Memphis that Still officially began his music career working as an arranger and performer for fellow African American composer and musician W.C. Handy.[3]

A year later, in 1916, Still chose to study at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. In 1919, when he was no longer financially able to attend, he moved to New York City to resume work with Handy. Between 1923 and 1925 he studied briefly with George Whitefield Chadwick (1854–1931) before he began studying with one of his most important influences, Edgar Varèse (1883–1965).[4] Varèse, along with the founder of the Eastman School of Music, Howard Hanson, was responsible for much of Still's success

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[1] For more on William Grant Still's life see Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2008).
[2] Letter, William Grant Still to Rose Heylbut, August 29, 1948, Box 24 (Misc. Hu-Hy), Still-Arvey Papers.
[3] For more on W.C. Handy see Tim Brooks, "W. C. Handy," *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry* (Champaign: University of Illinois, 2004).
[4] George Whitefield Chadwick was a composer, conductor, and directory of the New England Conservatory in Boston. For more on George Whitefield Chadwick as a composer see Marianne Betz, *George Whitefield Chadwick: An American Composer Revealed and Reflected* (Hillsdale: Pendragon Press, 2015).

during the 1920s and 30s.[5] In those decades, Still's voice in the American music scene was growing in influence. One contemporary writer described Still's work as that of "a modern American building on the musical heritage of classic Europe and on the feeling of his own Negro-American background."[6] Placing Still's work in the context of American art music of the twentieth-century was difficult, however, for many reasons, including race.

He and other African American composers writing music in the European tradition faced issues that their white counterparts did not.[7] At that time only jazz was considered "the province of black Americans," yet African Americans were striving to expand their influence into other areas of American music.[8] Commenting on his own experience with what was expected of black composers, Still said: "while the Negro idiom has colored my music, it hasn't wielded an influence that lessens my interest in *music*—of all sorts."[9] As John Taker Howard wrote in his 1941 book *Our Contemporary Composers: American Music in the Twentieth Century*, "while the white composer may or may not be conscious of his membership in a racial or national group, the Negro could not forget his if he would. His position in society forces on him an awareness of his fellowship in a community of color."[10] For African American composers, race was the lens through which their works

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[5] Hanson was the conductor who premiered Still's *Afro-American Symphony* in 1931 and claimed that Still "brought to music…a voice filled with lovely melodies, gorgeous harmonies, insidious rhythms and dazzling colors…Still brought a new ingredient to music, an ingredient which was a purely American idiom." Beverly Soll, *I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas, 2005), 13.

[6] Edwin R. Embree, *Thirteen against the Odds* (New York: Viking Press, 1945), 205.

[7] See William Grant Still, "Horizons Unlimited," in *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History*, ed. Leo Treitler (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1421–1423.

[8] Soll, *I Dream a World*, 13.

[9] This quote was taken from a 1979 journal article by Frank Haines that comments on the "changing cultural climate" in the U.S. that was gradually focusing less on Still's race in determining his status. Frank Haines, "William Grant Still….An American Composer Who Happens to be Black," *High Fidelity and Musical America* (March 1975): 27.

[10] Examples of this are found in a 1934 article written in the *Los Angeles Times* that refers to Still as an "Afro-American composer, [who] is in Los Angeles composing an opera," and in 1945, during a campaign to

were inevitably viewed. William Grant Still set out to challenge this view. He sought to establish himself as a leading composer of opera, not just an African-American composer who writes opera.

This study draws on and contributes to the disciplines of musicology and African-American studies by exploring the originality of William Grant Still's opera *Blue Steel* (1934), especially in its use of African and African-American traditions and stories. In this opera, Still brought an issue known in the African-American community as "double consciousness" to the grand stage.[11] He created new roles for African Americans in order to change the perception of black peoples in society by changing the perspective of blackness in opera. Blackness, for the purposes of this thesis, refers to a group of characteristics attributed to and intended to indicate people of African or African-American descent in order to accentuate their otherness.[12] Throughout this study I use primary and secondary sources to explore the presence and preservation of what W.E.B. Du Bois called "the veil," a metaphor for the psychological and physical indication of African Americans' difference from their white counterparts, and its role in the creation of "double consciousness," a feeling of divided identity, within the African American community. I then apply these ideas to a discussion of how Still exhibits "mastery of

raise funds for a production of Still's opera *Troubled Island*, the *New York Times* noted "Mayor La Guardia will meet with…the Negro press…to launch fund-raising activities for the production of the opera, *Troubled Island*, by Negro composer, William Grant Still." Soll, *I Dream a World*, 11–12.

[11] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1994), 2.

[12] Otherness is defined by Brian Treanor as "Anything unknown—that is, anything foreign, novel, surprising, disturbing, or otherwise resistant to the neat categories of the Narrative…In the most basic sense, the question of otherness asks us to consider what it means for something or someone to be other than the self." Brian Treanor, "The Question of Otherness," in *Aspects of Alterity: Levinas, Marcel, and the Contemporary Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 1–10. For more on otherness, specifically in relation to African Americans see Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016) and Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

form," a strategy African-American authors use to address double consciousness, in *Blue Steel*.[13] I argue that Still temporarily lifts the veil in his opera *Blue Steel* by providing a reading of blackness that is contrary to how blackness had typically been presented in operas by white composers.

Blue Steel is about an arrogant and boastful man named Blue Steel who finds his way into a small swamp village inhabited by a voodoo cult. The cult, headed by the high priest Venable soon becomes disgusted by Blue Steel's arrogance and disrespect for their mysteries. Blue Steel, unbothered by the hostility of the cult, seduces the high priest's daughter, Neola, out of lust and spite, promising her the beauty of the outside world. During one of their secret meetings, Neola decides to run away with Blue Steel, but their conversation is overheard by Doshy, one of the cult's elders. Neola, when reminded by Doshy of her vows to the cult, soon becomes conflicted between her feelings toward Blue Steel and the values of the cult. This struggle, which I argue is an interpretation of double consciousness, is the focus of the opera.

Blue Steel, despite its potential impact on the opera repertoire, has never been staged in full and no known recordings exist.[14] There is also very little scholarly literature that discusses this opera. Beverly Soll has produced one of the most comprehensive studies of *Blue Steel* in her book on the operas of William Grant Still, *I Dreamed a World: The Operas of William Grant Still* (2005). In addition, in the book *Blackness in Opera* (2012)

[13] Mastery of form and deformation of mastery are strategies coined by scholar Houston A. Baker when analyzing the progressive messages within the art of the Harlem Renaissance. See Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).
[14] A full score and libretto are available through William Grant Music in Flagstaff, Arizona, which is run by Still's daughter, Judith Anne Still. William Grant Still Music, 809 W. Riordan Road, Suite 100, Box 109, Flagstaff, AZ 86001.

Gayle Murchison's chapter provides an overview of the themes within the opera. Other than this, there are no significant published discussions of *Blue Steel*.

What does exist are written acknowledgements of excerpts of *Blue Steel* performed while Still was alive.[15] Also surviving are rejections from the Chicago Opera Company, Metropolitan Opera Association, and Los Angeles Federal Music Project, all of which claim that the refusal to program *Blue Steel* was not due to any failure of Still's "artistic merit."[16] Some additional correspondence regarding the possibility of staging the opera in Salt Lake City, at Juilliard, at the Paris Opera, at Covent Garden, and at another company in Chicago also exists, but these letters do not actually propose performances.[17] From 1934 to 1950 Still searched continuously but unsuccessfully for a company to stage *Blue Steel*.[18] In his lifetime, only three of his eight operas were ever staged and today that number remains. The purpose of this study is to shine a light on the operas of William Grant Still, whose dreams of becoming recognized as a leading composer of opera were never fully realized.

Overview

In Chapter 2, I focus on the African-American studies component of this thesis. I discuss the socio-political struggle of African Americans after emancipation and how this sparked the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance. The complexity of the fight for social and political equality is reflected in the differing views of two of its leaders:

[15] Soll's Appendix A includes Still's performance log of performances of arias or entire operas. Soll, *I Dream a World*, 227–235.
[16] Ibid., 83.
[17] Ibid., 84–85.
[18] In 1950, Still received a letter from Arthur Loy asking if Blue Steel "could be produced by school students…with average abilities." Ibid., 85.

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963). Washington's release of his autobiography *Up from Slavery* (1901), which expressed his views on how African Americans should assimilate into American society, sparked a rebuttal from Du Bois.[19] In Du Bois's response, the monumental book *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), he not only offered a differing opinion on how African Americans should go about being accepted into American society, but also theorized the veil and its consequence, double consciousness.[20] The veil affected how black peoples were viewed by white peoples, how white peoples were viewed by black peoples, and how black peoples viewed themselves.[21] Du Bois took this idea a step further and theorized that due to the effects of the veil on African Americans in the United States—oppression and the socio-political relegation to secondary citizenship—African Americans were gifted and cursed with double consciousness, the feeling of "twoness."[22]

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[19] Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co, 1907). For more on *Up from Slavery* and African-American representation see, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Booker T. Washington and Black Progress: Up from Slavery 100 Years Later* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003); Donald B. Gibson, "Strategies and Revisions of Self-Representation in Booker T. Washington's Autobiographies," *American Quarterly* 45, no.3 (September 1993): 370–393; and Raymond Hedin, "Paternal at Last: Booker T. Washington and the Slave Narrative Tradition," *Gailaloo* no. 7 (October 1979): 95–102.

[20] For more on W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* see Charles Lemert, "A Classic from the Other Side of the Veil: Du Bois's 'Souls of Black Folk,'" *The Sociological Quarterly* 35, no. 3 (August 1994): 383–396; and Melvin L. Rogers, "The People, Rhetoric, and Affect: On the Political Force of Du Bois's 'The Souls of Black Folk,'" *The American Political Science Review* 106, no. 1 (February 2012): 188–203.

[21] For more on the veil see Howard Winant, "Dialectics of the Veil," in *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 25–38; and Jerold J. Savory, "The Rending of the Veil in W. E. B. Du Bois's 'The Souls of Black Folk,'" *CLA Journal* 15, no. 3 (March 1972): 334–337.

[22] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2. For more on double consciousness and other theories on the psychological effects of socio-political oppression on African Americans see Shannon Mariotti, "On the Passing of the First-Born Son: Emerson's 'Focal Distancing,' Du Bois' 'Second Sight,' and Disruptive Particularity," *Political Theory* 37, no. 3 (June 2009): 351–374; Judith R. Blau and Eric S. Brown, "Du Bois and Diasporic Identity: The Veil and the Unveiling Project," *Sociological Theory* 19, no. 2 (July 2001): 219–233; Lynn England and W. Keith Warner, "W. E. B. Du Bois: Reform, Will, and the Veil," *Social Forces* 91, no. 3 (March 2013): 955–973; Anne Warfield Rawls, "'Race' as an Interaction Order Phenomenon: W.E.B. Du Bois's Double Consciousness' Thesis Revisited," *Sociological Theory* 18, no. 2 (July 2000): 241–274; and Dickson D. Bruce Jr., "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness," *American Literature* 64, no. 2 (June 1992): 299–309.

Du Bois's theory of double consciousness became an important focus during the Harlem Renaissance (approximately 1918–1930) as African Americans began to reconnect with their African heritage and expand their influence artistically, intellectually, and socially in America.[23] Reconciling both sides of their twoness—their African origins and their American birth—became imperative to understanding and altering their place in American society. Using Pan-African themes, leaders in the Harlem Renaissance explored double consciousness and created specifically African-American art forms that sought to change the negative stereotypes established by systems supporting views behind the veil. For African-American composers who wanted to succeed in the music of the European tradition, their double consciousness pushed them to discover new compositional techniques that drew from their African roots without perpetuating the stereotypes adopted by their white counterparts.[24] In particular, as the philosophies of the Harlem Renaissance spread, opera provided a medium for African-American composers, such as William Grant Still, to explore the issues troubling the souls of black folk.

In the 1980s, the voices expressed in the works of the Harlem Renaissance became an area of study for Houston A. Baker. He theorized two strategies, "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery," to describe how creators and activists during the Harlem Renaissance delivered their progressive messages either in traditional European art forms or by breaking free of those forms, thus marking "the birth of Afro-American

[23] For more on the correlation between self-consciousness and the arts of African Americans see Ronald A. T. Judy, "The New Black Aesthetic and W.E.B. Du Bois, or Hephaestus, Limping," *The Massachusetts Review* 35, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 249–282; and Paula J. Massood, "Heaven and Hell in Harlem: Urban Aesthetics for a Renaissance People," in *Making a Promised Land: Harlem in Twentieth-Century Photography and Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 51–87.
[24] Gayle Murchison, "New Paradigms in William Grant Still's Blue Steel," in *Blackness in Opera*, eds. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, Eric Saylor (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 142.

modernism."[25] These strategies came out of the necessity for African Americans to "effectively articulate the needs, virtues, and strengths of a mass of Afro-Americans stranded by Jim Crow discrimination."[26] Utilizing these strategies, leaders of the Harlem Renaissance were able to further explore their double consciousness by redefining how blackness was portrayed and perceived.

In Chapter 3, I identify how African carryovers that were once appropriated by whites and used to create negative stereotypes of African Americans were reimagined through Baker's mastery of form and deformation of mastery to create positive representations of blackness on stage. From the early nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, blackness was presented negatively in the highly successful minstrel tradition. White minstrels in blackface allowed white Americans an opportunity to have a black experience. As entertainment, they would perform black-influenced dance and songs as black caricatures, typically boastful but naïve and dim-witted.[27] Many of the audience members attended these shows out of fascination, and this experience was the only way in which they came to understand black people. This created negative stereotypes that reinforced the view of African Americans behind the veil. Reacting to how blackface had become a way in which white Americans were able to understand blackness, leaders within

[25] Houston A. Baker Jr., "Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance," *American Quarterly* 39, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 92–94. For more on the Harlem Renaissance in the context of modernism, see Lindon Barrett, "Modernism and the Effects of Racial Blackness," in *Racial Blackness and the Discontinuity of Racial Blackness*, eds. Justin A. Joyce, Dwight A. McBride, John Carlos Rowe (Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2014), 157–189.
[26] Baker, "Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance," 92.
[27] For more on minstrel characters and characteristics see Alan W. C. Green, "'Jim Crow,' 'Zip Coon': The Northern Origins of Negro Minstrelsy," *The Massachusetts Review* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1970): 385–397; and Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

the Harlem Renaissance set out to change the way African Americans were viewed by taking a "discursive stance in relationship" to forms familiar to white Americans.[28]

Baker originally theorized mastery of form and deformation of mastery in part by discussing the stances taken by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in relation to "the minstrel mask."[29] In *Up from Slavery,* Washington included stereotypes similar to those in blackface minstrel shows (old black men and women and the "overly ambitious" black person from the north) as well as racist "darky jokes," but ultimately he combatted them by using the funds raised from his speeches in this "minstrel sound" to fund an institution black higher education.[30] By contrast, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois rejected the minstrel tradition and privileged instead the sound of the Afro-American spiritual, especially as popularized by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, as "a carrier of a black folk energy."[31] Though their approaches were different, both writers temporarily lifted the veil by offering a new understanding of African-American culture that differed from the one perpetuated by blackface minstrelsy. In Chapter 4, I explain Still's presentation of double consciousness in his opera *Blue Steel*, first in the plot and then in the music. I show how his use of mastery of form finally creates a different reading of blackness in the opera tradition. Still worked to fuse "high culture and vernacular expressivity" in his operas, thereby embedding the progressive messages of the Harlem Renaissance in his music.[32] As

[28] Baker, "*Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*," 93.
[29] Ibid., 92.
[30] Ibid., 93.
[31] Ibid., 93. Fisk University's Fisk Jubilee Singers are known for their performances of African-American Spirituals and attributed to making the genre popular internationally. They were first formed with the intent to tour and raise money for Fisk University. For more see Toni P. Anderson, *Tell Them We Are Singing for Jesus: The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers and Christian Reconstruction, 1871–1878* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2009); and Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers* (New York: Amistad Press, 2001).
[32] Ibid., 93.

a proponent of those ideals, Still conveyed his philosophy of togetherness and inclusivity in his music, and his hopes and dreams for the world are nowhere more apparent and realized than in his operas. Beverly Soll has described how much Still gave of himself to these works, which is emphasized by the over 1700 references to them in his personal diaries.[33] It is within the operas that Still shares "a vision of the world he dreamed might be possible."[34]

This opera is unique to era of the Harlem Renaissance not only because Still incorporates a Pan-African theme, Haitian Vodou, but also because of how he addresses the idea of blackness. Calling for an all-black cast, Still presents blackness in a complex way, and by exploring double consciousness in the European-derived form of opera, he exhibits mastery of form. His approach serves to temporarily lift the veil and examine blackness unto itself.[35]

[33] Soll, *I Dreamed a World*, 37.
[34] Ibid., x.
[35] This strategy is the doubling of blackness, which serves to negate the initial response to blackness. For an example of doubling blackness in the minstrel tradition, see Leroy Hopkins, "Louis Douglas and the Weimar Reception of Harlemania," in *Germans and African Americans: Two Centuries of Exchange*, eds. Ankle Ortlepp and Larry A. Greene (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 50–69.

Chapter Two: Consequences of Inequality: The Veil and the Realization of Double Consciousness

After the Civil War and ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, the United Sates lacked a definitive plan for how to deal with the millions of slaves it had just set free. Though programs and laws were put into place to assist the transition of African American slaves into the life of freed persons, such as the creation of the Freedman's Bureau and the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the social and psychological effects of slavery and racism continued to impact their assimilation into American society.[36]

The unstable racial climate in America allowed what W.E.B. Du Bois described as the veil to manifest itself in American society due to systemic racism.[37] Because African American citizens were treated as less than their white counterparts, they were forced into a secondary citizenship role. This inequality sparked The New Negro Movement in the 1890s and the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1910s, both of which helped define what it is to be an African American. These movements cultivated environments that brought about

[36] For more on the socio-political landscape in the United States during Reconstruction see Donald G. Nieman, "To Set the Law in Motion: The Freedmens Bureau and the Legal Rights of Blacks, 1865–1868," PhD diss., Rice University, 1975; Joel Williamson, *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina During Reconstruction, 1861–1877* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975); Thomas R. Johnson, "Reconstruction Politics in Washington: 'An Experimental Garden for Radical Plants,'" *Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C.* 50, no. 15 (1980): 180–190; and Carl H. Moneyhon, "Public Education and Texas Reconstruction Politics, 1871–1874," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 92, no. 3 (January 1989): 393–416.

[37] For more on systemic racism see Richard Lofton and James Earl Davis, "Toward a Black Habitus: African Americans Navigating Systemic Inequalities within Home, School, and Community," *The Journal of Negro Education* 84, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 214–230; Daniel Geary, "The New Racism," in *Beyond Civil Rights: The Moynihan Report and Its Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 79–109; William A. Smith, "Toward an Understanding of Misandric Microaggressions and Racial Battle Fatigue among African Americans in Historically White Institutions," in *The State of the African American Male* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010), 265–278; and Joyce E. King, "Dysconscious Racism Ideology, Identity, and Miseducation," in *Critical White Studies* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 128–132.

the birth of new music and art.[38] In some cases, these new works incorporated unique African-American traits into European-derived art forms; in other cases, they deliberately deformed those preexisting forms.

Houston A. Baker has designated the ability to incorporate a distinctly African American message into historically European art forms as "mastery of form" and the ability to break down Eurocentric art forms as "deformation of mastery."[39] However, even with these innovative strategies, much of the new music and art of the Harlem Renaissance was relegated to a low aesthetic status, revealing that the sociological effects of the veil impacted the arts as well. This chapter provides historical context for Still's "mastery of form" in *Blue Steel* by examining how contrasting ideas within the New Negro Movement fed contrasting creative strategies ("mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery") in the Harlem Renaissance, as demonstrated through an analysis of two contrasting Harlem Renaissance poems.

Contrasts Within the New Negro Movement

Facing many social and political injustices, African Americans found the assimilation into American society as equitable citizens difficult, even though federal legislation was intended to assist their passage into citizenship. Although the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and the Thirteenth Amendment in 1864 had set African American

[38] For more on the artistic accomplishments of African Americans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see Benjamin Griffith Brawley, *The Negro Genius: A New Appraisal of the Achievement of the American Negro in Literature and the Fine Arts* (New York: Dodd Mead & Company, 1937).
[39] Mastery of form and deformation of mastery were coined by Houston A. Baker in his evaluation of art of the Harlem Renaissance. Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

slaves free and abolished slavery, African Americans were still not legal citizens, despite their over 250-year presence in and economic contributions to the country.[40] After the Fourteenth Amendment gave African Americans legal citizenship in 1868 and the Fifteenth Amendment gave the right to vote in 1870, Jim Crow Laws put in place after the Reconstruction period sought to remind African Americans of their inferiority to their white counterparts. These contradictions, highlighted by the Supreme Court's 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, reinforced the belief that African Americans were second class citizens.[41]

Racial pressures were felt especially by African Americans in the segregated south. The federal laws that gave them the rights of American citizens—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—were negated by contradictory laws that withdrew the progress made during Reconstruction.[42] Post-Reconstruction laws, mainly in the South, kept schools and both public and private facilities segregated. In addition, voting and voter registration restrictions kept African Americans and poor white Americans disenfranchised, with little to no input in the policies that governed them. Politicians were adamant about keeping

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[40] "The economic value of the nation's slaves in 1860 exceeded by far the value of the nation's entire industrial complex. The total capital value of American was only 1.1 billion dollars, one-third of the value of slaves." Charles H. Josephson, "Arithmetic and history," *The Arithmetic Teacher* 17, no. 6 (October 1970): 489–490.

[41] John P. Roche, "Plessy v. Ferguson: Requiescat in Pace?" *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 103, no. 1 (October 1954): 44–58. For more on this case and its impact see Jessica Foy, "Plessy v. Ferguson," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 10: Law and Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 115–116; Bernard R. Boxill, "Washington, Du Bois, and 'Plessy V. Ferguson,'" *Law and Philosophy* 16, no. 3 (May 1997): 299-330; and Harry E. Groves, "Separate but Equal—The Doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson," *Phylon* 12, no. 1 (1951): 66–72.

[42] Jim Crow Laws were discriminatory and created to keep people segregated by race. See Leslie V. Tischauser, *Jim Crow Laws* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2012); Charles E. Connerly, "Planning and Jim Crow," in *The Most Segregated City in America: City Planning and Civil Rights in Birmingham, 1920-1980* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 36–68.; Elizabeth Guffey, "Knowing Their Space: Signs of Jim Crow in the Segregated South," *Design Issues* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 41–60; and William J. Wilson, "Class Conflict and Jim Crow Segregation in the Postbellum South," *The Pacific Sociological Review* 19, no. 4 (October 1976): 431–446.

these voices unheard, as is made clear in a statement made by South Carolina Senator Benjamin Tillman in 1900: "We have done our level best…we have scratched our heads to find out how we could eliminate the last one of them. We stuffed ballot boxes. We shot them [Negroes.] We ARE NOT ASHAMED OF IT."[43]

Voting laws enacted in Southern states were not the only tactic used to keep African Americans suppressed. Lynching intimidated and terrorized the African-American community, keeping individuals fearful of retaliation if they were to question the status quo. This fear, in combination with other legal restrictions, kept many black people from pursuing jobs in white-collar professions. Thus, thirty-six years after they received their freedom and thirty-two years after they became legalized citizens, African Americans remained victims of systemized racism that not only kept many of them relegated to a low place in society, but also deepened the economic divide between white and black Americans.[44]

America had given African Americans a subsidiary place in society, yet they refused to live lives of insignificance. Their defiance of systemic racism took form in the New Negro Movement, which is embodied by the voices of Booker T. Washington (1856–1915) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), whose contrasting approaches sparked debate on how African Americans would gain their rightful place in American society. Racism and injustice, while most evident and disturbing in the South, were not exclusive to it. Many African Americans in the northern states had similar experiences with discrimination based

[43] Rayford W. Logan, *Betrayal of the Negro, from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 100.
[44] Few jobs outside of labor work became available to African Americans Post-Reconstruction. This issue later became a substantial point of debate between Washington and Du Bois in regard to the progress of African Americans.

on the color of their skin. These shared experiences among African Americans sparked the rise of the New Negro movement in the 1890s. At this time, African American leaders and scholars emerged who refused their subjection and demanded their legal rights as citizens under the Fourteenth Amendment. Two of the most popular of these leaders and scholars were Washington and Du Bois. Although these two leaders had differing ideological views, their goal, and the goal of the New Negro movement, was to challenge and destroy negative stereotypes of African Americans and end African American disenfranchisement in the South.

Washington's approach to the issues of racism and disenfranchisement was steady and slow.[45] He advocated for industrial education and the gradual accumulation of wealth, which he felt would eventually bring about the conciliation of the South. In his 1865 Atlanta Exposition address, Washington laid out this program and his belief that "blacks would eventually gain full participation in society by showing themselves to be responsible, reliable American citizens."[46] He claimed:

> As we have proved our loyalty to you in the past, in nursing your children, watching by the sick-bed of your mothers and fathers, and often following them with tear-dimmed eyes to their graves, so in the future, in our humble way, we shall stand by you with a devotion that no foreigner can approach, ready to lay down our lives, if need be, in defense of yours, interlacing our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with yours in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.[47]

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[45] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others," in *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1994), 25–35. See also Louis R. Harlan, *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, vol. 10 (1909-1911); Louis Harlan, "Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Accommodation," in *Booker T. Washington in Perspective: Essays of Louis R. Harlan*, ed. Raymond W. Smock (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 164–179; and Judith Stein, "'Of Mr. Booker T. Washington and Others': The Political Economy of Racism in the United States," *Science and Society* 38, no. 4 (Winter 1974/1975): 422–463.
[46] Booker T. Washington, "Atlanta Exposition Address" (Atlanta, GA, September 1895), Sharp School, http://wwphs.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_10640642/File/bugge/Chapter%2017/washingtonvsdubois.PDF.
[47] Ibid.

Many African Americans and whites from both the North and the South praised Washington and his program. However, Du Bois, who was once a supporter of Washington, took issue with his slow and steady approach to the advancement of blacks in American society. He associated Washington's program with "submission and silence" and felt that it "practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races."[48] Washington's "propaganda," as Du Bois called it, left the impression that the South's attitude toward African Americans was justified, that the reason for their slow rise in society was their miseducation, and that the future of African Americans depended on their own efforts.[49]

For Du Bois, Washington's focus on the economic advancement of black people through technical training was not properly thought through; it stepped toward equal rights but did not demand full equality under the law.[50] He claimed Washington's plan suggested "that the Negro can survive only through submission" and thus had to give up political power, "insistence on civil rights," and the "higher education of Negro youth."[51] Du Bois thus questioned Washington's economic agenda, stating:

> Is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meager chance for developing their exceptional men?[52]

For Du Bois, Washington and his program represented a triple paradox. First, although Washington strived to make blacks "business men and property-owners," they would be

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[48] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 25–28.
[49] Ibid., 34.
[50] Du Bois, in the "Of Sons of Master and Man," dissects issues that may arise in focusing on the technical training of African Americans and funneling them into the workforce. He advises for "careful personal guidance, group leadership of men with hearts…to train them to foresight, carefulness, and honesty" in order to overcome the "handicapped" training of slavery, which is the opposite of the training received by the "modern self-reliant [white] democratic laborer." Ibid., 102.
[51] Ibid., 30.
[52] Ibid., 31.

unable to "defend their rights and exist without the right of suffrage."[53] Second, if "he insists on thrift and self-respect, but…counsels silent submission to civic inferiority," this would undermine the manhood of the race.[54] And lastly, if he advocates for common school and industrial training but "depreciates [black] institutions of higher learning," those very common schools, as well as Washington's own Tuskegee University, would not remain open without instructors trained at (or trained by graduates of) black colleges.

The paradoxes Du Bois described encapsulated criticism of Washington's approach from two different groups of African Americans.[55] One group did not trust the white race and believed that the only hope for black people was to emigrate from the United States; the other agreed with Washington and his "Atlanta Compromise" in a general sense, but did not agree with his submissive approach. For them, to sit silently would sow seeds of disaster for future generations, both black and white. Du Bois fell into the latter group. He and a group of like-minded individuals sought to take a more active approach to ending the disfranchisement of African Americans and improving their educational opportunities. Problems within the African American community could only be solved through policy and "clinging unwaveringly" to the words of Founding Fathers: "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."[56]

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[53] Ibid., 31.
[54] Ibid., 31.
[55] Du Bois defines three main forms of thought for an "imprisoned group." He describes them as having either "a feeling of revolt and revenge; an attempt to adjust all thought and action to the will of the greater group; or, finally, a determined effort at self-realization and self-development despite environing opinion." Washington would represent the second group of thought. Ibid., 28.
[56] Ibid., 31.

Du Bois's Veil and Double Consciousness

In 1903, eight years after Washington's Atlanta Exposition address, Du Bois published his book *The Souls of Black Folk.* The book consisted of essays that were previously published in magazines and journals and addressed not only the issues affecting the African American community, but also the color line that existed between white and black Americans. This color line was the basis of what Du Bois called the veil and its consequence, double consciousness.

Du Bois introduced the concept of the veil by recalling the first time he realized he was affected by it. In grade school one of his white female classmates did not accept the visiting card he attempted to give her during a group exchange. When his card was rejected with a glance, he realized he was different from the others in his class.[57] The veil is physically seen in the color of African-American skin, which indicates difference from whiteness and therefore impairs not only white people's ability to see African Americans as true Americans, but also African Americans' ability to see themselves outside of what has been prescribed to them.[58] The veil's impairing ability impacted many social ideals during the Post-Reconstruction era, which is evident in the aforementioned laws and in socially acceptable discrimination against black people.

Du Bois wrote about the many years he spent driven by feelings of accomplishment and pride when he beat his classmates on exams and even in foot races, but he soon realized that these successes would not yield him the opportunities and self-fulfillment he

[57] Ibid., 2. Du Bois grew up in Great Barrington, MA and attended an integrated public school. See David L. Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009).
[58] For more on African-American identity from Emancipation into the early twentieth century see Bethany Johnson, "Freedom and Slavery in the *Voice of the Negro*: Historical Memory and African-American Identity, 1904-1907," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 84, no 1 (Spring 2000): 29–71.

was fighting for: those belonged only to his classmates.[59] The strife and difficulty black people encountered when trying to overcome the pitfalls of the veil, Du Bois argued, led to their "tasteless sycophancy," their "distrust of everything white," or even simply to a "bitter cry."[60] These conditions created a unique experience that granted a special, yet bitter, gift to African Americans that Du Bois called "double consciousness":

> Born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.[61]

This "twoness" or "double-consciousness" provided African Americans with a deeper understanding of the world in which they existed, but also generated a desire for self-realization and a merging of the double self into a "truer self."[62] The truer self would no longer have to strive to be an equal to a white counterpart but would be fully integrated into American society, contributing the great mind and body of the black people exemplified in the tales of Ethiopia and Egypt. Du Bois felt this power was wasted and often disregarded before it could be realized.

In the Post-Reconstruction era, double-consciousness was personified in the differing arguments of African American leaders such as Washington and Du Bois. As these leaders established closer ties to specific grievances of the community and committed to programs to address them, they encountered "the double-aimed struggle."[63] They had to

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[59] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 2.
[60] Ibid., 2.
[61] Ibid., 2.
[62] Ibid., 2. For more experiences of double consciousness see Lawrie Balfour, "'A Most Disagreeable Mirror': Race Consciousness as Double Consciousness," *Political Theory* 26, no. 2 (June 1998): 346–369.
[63] Ibid., 3.

find a way to reconcile the views of whites without ostracizing the majority of the community they set out to serve. As the African American community continued to push forward in efforts to reconcile double-consciousness and improve its standing in American society, largely through the growing importance of education within the community, it experienced a dawning of self-respect and self-realization: self-consciousness.[64] With a new sense of self-awareness, African Americans began to realize that in order to secure their place in America they must confront and analyze the burdens of centuries of "systematic legal defilement" in order to address the social issues that kept the race handicapped.[65]

This movement of self-consciousness is embodied in the writings and artistic creations of those who lived through the gains and losses made during the Reconstruction and Post-Reconstruction periods. As many African Americans began to migrate north to escape the brutal Jim Crow Laws governing the South, in conjunction with an influx of blacks from the Caribbean, the result was a convergence of ideas and culture in Northern cities, especially the city of Harlem, New York beginning in 1916.[66] Thus, by the time Alan Locke's *The New Negro: An Interpretation* was published in 1925—the text that popularized the term New Negro—a period of intellectual and cultural discovery was already in full swing.[67]

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[64] Du Bois stresses the importance of education to the African American community in order for the race to progress. He later provides statistical information on of this growing importance stating "demand for higher training steadily increases among Negro youth: there were, in the years from 1875 to 1880, 22 Negro graduates from Northern colleges; from 1885 to 1890 there were 43, and from 1895 to 1900, nearly 100 graduates. From Southern Negro colleges, there were, in the same three periods, 143, 413, and over 500 graduates." Ibid., 65.
[65] Ibid., 5.
[66] For more on the Great Migration see Ted Vincent, "The Window of Opportunity," *The Black Scholar* 22, no. 4 (Fall 1992): 6–16.
[67] Alain Locke, *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925).

The Harlem Renaissance: Mastery of Form and Deformation of Mastery

The heart of the Harlem Renaissance was its leaders' focus on intellect. The primary goal was to uplift the race, as seen through the creation of new art forms as well as the incorporation of African and African-American characteristics into preexisting art forms. This fusion of a Pan-African experience with traditional European art forms offered the world a different perspective on African Americans. Just as leaders in the African-American community offered contrasting strategies for addressing systemic inequality, African-American artists approached the fusion of African and European-derived art in contrasting ways. In this section, I explain the two contrasting approaches that Houston A. Baker identified as "mastery of form" and "deformation of mastery" by demonstrating how these strategies are realized in two Harlem Renaissance poems that deal with double-consciousness.

The awakening of self-realization and the acknowledgment of double-consciousness within the African-American community offered the race a new birth and pride during the Harlem Renaissance. It offered artists an opportunity to express themselves in a deeper and more intellectual way and allowed white Americans to gain a better understanding of the psychology of a misunderstood and rejected people through art forms they could understand.[68] The ability of these artists to put powerful messages into pre-existing forms, sometimes by destroying those very forms, was the topic of Houston A.

[68] For reactions of white Americans to the Harlem Renaissance see James F. Wilson, "'Harlem on My Mind': New York's Black Belt on the Great White Way," in *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 43–78; and Frances Richardson Keller, "The Harlem Literary Renaissance," *The North American Review* 253, no. 3 (May–June 1968): 29–34. There were also white people who were patrons of the Harlem Renaissance. See Emily Bernard, "WHAT HE DID FOR THE RACE: Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 531–542.

Baker Jr.'s 1989 book *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*.[69] In order to explain a Harlem Renaissance creator's relationship with their art, Baker explored strategies of writing that he called "mastery of form" and the "deformation of mastery."

"Mastery of form" describes the creator's ability to meld their voice with the dominant tradition in a way that allows their message to be heard. Deformation of mastery, by contrast, is the creator's choice to reject tradition and attack it by delivering their message in a way that destabilizes conventions of either form or content in the dominant tradition. Thus, African-American artists, like many leaders in the black community, often had the same goal—to deliver an African-American perspective that advanced the race—but nonetheless employed contrasting strategies. This is especially evident in the poems "Heritage" (1925) by Countee Cullen and "Merry Christmas" (1930) by Langston Hughes, both of which address the seemingly contradictory nature of Christianity within the African-American community: the religion of the ancestors versus the religion of the oppressors.[70] In their poems, Cullen and Hughes address issues of twoness and religion differently. While Cullen addresses the subject in a reserved nature, Hughes' tone is much more aggressive. These poems thus have similar content but two different approaches,

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[69] Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[70] African-American Christianity became a topic of discussion in works of the Harlem Renaissance due to its ability to convey the "sense of disconnectedness and otherness" of Du Bois's double-consciousness theory. Shirley A. Waters White writes: "African Americans for more than 400 years [have had to] reconcile the paradoxes of a God-fearing nation with the unjust and oftentimes inhuman treatment to which they are subjected." In her study of the writings of Du Bois on Christianity in the black community, Waters White finds that Du Bois's inability to "maintain a distance between his personal beliefs and his observations as a [social] scientist" causes his life to "[epitomize] many of the tensions and problems inherent both in Black life in America as well as Black life as Christians." Shirley A. Waters White, "A Consideration of African American Christianity as a Manifestation of Du Boisian Double-Consciousness," *Phylon* 51, no. 1 (Fall 2014): 30. For more on Du Bois's thoughts on Christianity in African American culture see Edward J. Blum, "A Dark Monk Who Wrote History and Sociology: The Spiritual Wage of Whiteness, the Black Church, and Mystical Africa," in *W.E B. Du Bois, American Prophet* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 98–133.

such that Cullen's poem represents "mastery of form" and Hughes' poem represents "deformation of mastery."

In "Heritage," Cullen's whit, imagination, and perceptiveness shine.[71] He begins by asking the question "what is Africa to me"? The poem first indicates a connection between the speaker and the continent by describing a vivid image of an African landscape, but Cullen then creates distance between Africa and the speaker by acknowledging that the speaker is "one three centuries removed."[72] The following lines describe the speaker's conflicting feelings:

> Great drums throbbing through air
> So I lie, whose fount of pride
> Dear distress, and joy allied
> Is my somber flesh and skin
> With the dark blood dammed within

His pride in his heritage brings both joy and distress with his realization that it is somehow looked down upon and something not to be celebrated. Cullen's speaker obviously knows of Africa and his connection to it, yet is distanced to the point of imagination.

Cullen's speaker continues his distancing from his heritage in relation to its religion, with lines like "Quaint, outlandish heathen gods" and "Heathen gods are naught to me."[73] Although he dissociates himself from the gods of Africa and clearly aligns himself with Christianity—in the line "I belong to Jesus Christ"—there is a part of him that is still a bit unsettled in this religion.[74] The speaker, though devoted to Christianity, still

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[71] Countee Cullen, "Heritage," *The Survey* 47 (March 1925): 674–676.
[72] Ibid., 674.
[73] Ibid., 675.
[74] The gods of Africa that Cullen is referring to are those of the Haitian Vodou religion, which is closely associated with the West African religion of Vodun. See Laurent Dubois, "Vodou and History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43, no. 1 (January 2001): 92–100; and Ina J. Fandrich, "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo," *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 5 (May 2007): 775–791.

feels a disconnect and questions his ability to relate to the image of Christ. He also wonders whether Christianity, in turn, could truly relate to him.

> Ever at Thy glowing altar
> Must my heart grow sick and falter,
> Wishing He I served were black,
> Thinking then it would not lack
> Precedent of pain to guide it,
> Let who would or might deride it;
> Surely then this flesh would know
> Yours had borne a kindred woe.[75]

Here the speaker questions Christianity's authenticity to him and his life experiences. This is perhaps the most interesting aspect when it comes to understanding the uniqueness of double consciousness. Individuals have a strong sense of connection to an essence of their being that is outside of what has been ingrained in them or what is socially acceptable or expected.

Hughes' 1930 poem titled "Merry Christmas" addresses the seemingly contradictory nature of Christianity directly.[76] He uses one of the most recognizable Christian holidays to symbolize the religion as a whole and wastes no time in pointing out its contradictions. The poem begins: "Merry Christmas, China / From the gun-boats in the river / Ten-inch shells for Christmas gifts /And peace on earth forever," pointing out that a season that is supposed to be joyous is filled with violence.[77] In later stanzas he addresses what he considers to be the atrocities and oppressive nature of Christianity in black countries:

> Ring Merry Christmas, Africa,
> From Cairo to the Cape!

[75] Cullen, "Heritage," 675.
[76] For more on the context of Hughes's poem see Faith Berry, *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* (New York: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1983), 107–109.
[77] Langston Hughes, "Merry Christmas," *New Masses* 6, no. 7 (December 1930): 4.

Ring Halleluiah! Praise the Lord!
(For murder and for rape.)

Ring Merry Christmas, Haiti!
(And drown the voodoo drums —
We'll rob you to the Christian hymns
Until the next Christ comes.)

Hughes addresses the disingenuous side of Christianity directly, while Cullen's "Heritage" addressed the problematic nature of Christianity in a subtle, yet no less stirring way. At the heart of these poems is the identification of contradictory feelings: is there a way to truly be both things? The ending of Hughes' poem sheds additional light on what he may have thought about this question:

While, better still, the Christian guns
Proclaim this joyous day!
While holy steel that makes us strong
Spits forth a mighty Yuletide song:
SHOOT Merry Christmas everywhere!
Let Merry Christmas GAS the air!

Hughes suggests that Christianity is suffocating and therefore killing the heritage of native and diasporic peoples.[78]

These poems by Cullen and Hughes exemplify Baker's contrasting approaches. Cullen showed mastery of form with his more traditional approach to the art of poetry. He was able to share the message of the speaker's struggle between his African-American heritage and Christianity within a traditional poetic structure. His rhyme scheme and structure are consistent so that his message remained fused within a form that white Americans were familiar with. Hughes, on the other hand, challenged not only society's inequalities and constructs, but the medium he chose to use to convey his messages. In

[78] For more insight on Hughes' views through his writings see Langston Hughes, *The Ways of White Folks* (New York: Knopf, 1934).

"Merry Christmas," he is forthright with content and blunt with its delivery. His structure is also different from that of traditional poetry. He deforms the poetic structure by interjecting his own thoughts in parentheses, offering a voice outside of the poetry. Hughes follows every joy-filled statement with cruel truths, thus blurring the line between political rhetoric and poetic beauty and creating a poem full of irony. It is no surprise that Hughes often advocated for "deformation of mastery" and foregrounded his political stance in regard to the treatment of the African-American community.[79]

Conclusion

As the awakening of black people began and their works and ideas became steadily distributed across the United States and the world, the attraction and interest in blackness began to grow. Though racial equality through intellectual works was at the forefront of the Harlem Renaissance, the veil remained intact. African Americans continued to seek reconnection to a lost home while seeking a place in the only one they knew. Through the unique black and African-American themes and characteristics incorporated in (or against) traditionally white, European-derived art forms, artists were able to address the veil and double consciousness. In some cases, they were able to finally find reconciliation for two battling souls, as, I argue, happens in Still's opera *Blue Steel*.

[79] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation*, June 23, 1926.

Chapter Three: Views from the Veil: Blackness on Stage

African Americans have had a significant impact on America's musical and entertainment traditions. Victims of the slave trade came from many different parts of the African continent, but once they were in the Americas, people who once took pride in their ethnic differences were tasked with creating an identity and culture that would unite them all. Despite overcoming the odds, the culture African Americans created became exploited and used as entertainment for white audiences. Appropriating the music, movements, and black skin of African Americans in the nineteenth century, white minstrels sought to profit from the culture of this group in comedic fashion. Although the minstrel tradition was racist in nature, African-American performers also participated in the tradition.

The perpetuation of negative stereotypes was addressed early in the twentieth century by both the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance. African-American activists, intellectuals, playwrights, and actors all bonded together to address issues with how blackness was portrayed and perceived on stage. Because at that time blackness on stage was largely presented from behind the veil—prohibiting audiences from seeing the beauty within African Americans and their culture—it was imperative for leaders of the Harlem Renaissance to challenge negative stereotypes by producing literary and stage works that that portrayed African Americans in a more positive light.

In order to understand the significance of William Grant Still's accomplishment of lifting the veil in *Blue Steel*, we must first understand how blackness was presented behind the veil on stage in the past and how leaders of the Harlem Renaissance sought to challenge those portrayals. This chapter identifies African traits that made African-American musical traditions and forms unique, connecting African Americans to their

homeland despite their removal from it. In particular, I discuss how African carryover traits were appropriated in the minstrel tradition in derogatory ways, thus creating a view of blackness from behind the veil.[80] These negative views of blackness were then challenged by the creation of an African-American theater tradition in the early twentieth century. Finally, I consider how blackness has been handled specifically on the opera stage. I argue that African carryovers and African-American traditions that white Americans used to perpetuate negative stereotypes were re-appropriated by African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance to change how blackness was portrayed and therefore how African Americans were viewed.

African Carryovers

In the twentieth century, the study of cultural carryovers in the African diaspora became an interest for scholars in America and around the world.[81] This area of study strove to understand how African culture survived the Middle Passage. Scholar Babatunde Lawal identifies, in the book *Black Theater: Ritual Performance In The African Diaspora*, the two dominating anthropological theories behind African carryovers: retention theory and innovation theory.[82] Retention theory, advocated by Melville Herskovits, argues that "deeply rooted commonalities" of various African languages and cultures facilitated the

[80] Langston Hughes discusses the use of race in performance in the chapter "Rejuvenation Through Joy" in his book *The Ways of White Folks*. See Sonnet Retman, "Langston Hughes's 'Rejuvenation of Joy': Passing, Racial Performance, and the Marketplace," *African American Review* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 593–602.
[81] For more on diasporic cultures see Toyin Falola, "Africa, The Homeland: Diasporic Cultures," *The Power of African Cultures* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2003), 274–305.
[82] Babatunde Lawal, "The African Heritage of African American Art and Performance," in *Black Theater: Ritual Performance In The African Diaspora*, eds. Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, Gus Edwards, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 43–44.

retention of a generalized form of African culture.[83] Scholars such as Sidney Mintz and Richard Price argued, however, for innovation theory, which claims that a new, hybrid culture was created as captive Africans adapted common cultural traits to new situations.[84] Lawal comes to the conclusion that both theories complement each other, since "the nature of Africanisms in a given area depends on variables such as the ethnic composition of slave populations, the number of trained, African-born artists among them, and the prevailing attitude of the slave masters toward African carryovers."[85] Lawal provides two contrasting examples. In Brazil and Cuba, slave masters allowed their Youruba and Kongo captives to "organize themselves into ethnic associations," which allows carryovers from their cultures to be easily identified in Brazilian and Cuban culture. In North America, however, slave masters did not allow their slaves the same opportunities, and their carryovers survived in more fragmented forms, such as quilts, musical instruments, and woodcarvings.[86] In this section, I examine how the cultural suppression of these different African ethnic groups resulted in a more homogenous culture—an African-American culture—that would become a signifier of blackness on stage.

The suppression of the individuality of African ethnic groups created a sense of unity among slaves due to their shared oppression. Slaves no longer identified themselves

[83] For more see Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).
[84] Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 8.
[85] Lawal, "The African Heritage of African American Art and Performance," 44.
[86] Despite the suppression of their captives' cultural and ethnic unity, slave masters did indirectly contribute to some preservation of African culture. Slaves were allowed to come together and celebrate special occasions, often displaying their heritage in the performances of dances similar to those they performed at rituals. One of the most popular of these dances is the *juba* dance, which does not have an exact origin but is believed to be related to the Yoruba people because of the rag dress of performers and juba's translation in Yoruba as "homage or obeisance." The dance included "masculine strides, quick dramatic turns, rhythmic staccato foot patterns and stamping, [and] vigorous swinging of the arms." Ibid., 45–47.

as individuals along ethnic lines as in precolonial Africa, but through a new consciousness based on the idea of race. Descendants of those who survived the Middle Passage were now united, according to scholar Colin Palmer, "by a past based significantly but not exclusively upon 'racial' oppression and the struggles against it; [they] share an emotional bond with one another and their ancestral continent…[facing] broadly similar problems in constructing and realizing themselves."[87]

Heavily influenced by the art of Europe, American slave masters retrained their slaves to make crafts in the European style. African art was seen as a gateway for spirits to manifest themselves in the physical world and this concept was foreign to Europeans, whose arts typically emphasized naturalism. African arts were thus designated as the primitive art of uncivilized people. The modernist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, however, sparked a new interest in African art. World renowned artists such as Pablo Picasso, Maurice Vlaminck, and Henri Matisse were looking to African sculptures for inspiration, and this spurred a change in attitude about African art.[88] This newfound interest in the art of Africa was not limited to white and European artists and intellectuals. African Americans were also interested in reconnecting with their past as a means to establish a culture authentic to their experiences. One way they did was to look to cultural traits that had been carried over from Africa.

In the early twentieth century, African carryovers were especially prominent in African American musics, such as spirituals, blues, and jazz, and through these musics

[87] Colin Palmer, "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora," *Perspectives: American Historical Association Newsletter* 36, no. 6 (1998): 23.
[88] Ibid., 48.

African traits became an important part of American music culture.[89] Lawal explains the carryovers present in these genres and how many African traditions, and instruments, transformed to fit new conditions.[90] African-American spirituals emphasized the spiritual relationship between African Americans and a Christian God, much like the relationship their ancestors shared with African gods and ancestors.[91] In African-American sermons, "antiphonal performance, loud strident vocal quality, and bodily movement during singing," as well as the call-and-response style—which is related to African storytellers, *griots*—are all tied to African practices.[92] Indeed, strident vocal qualities are reminiscent of African tonal languages in which the inflection of words communicates an idea.[93] Another connection to the African *griot* can be found in professional blues musicians. In their sung stories of the African-American experience, they emphasized "rhythm, syncopation, stylized vocality, improvisation, polyphony, and call-and-response

[89] For more information on African-American culture as an important influence on American popular culture see W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Beyond Blackface: African Americans and the Creation of American Popular Culture, 1890–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).
[90] For more on the reforming of African carryovers see Ingrid T. Monson, "Forced Migration, Asymmetrical Power Relations and African-American Music: Reformulation of Cultural Meaning and Musical Form," *The World of Music* 32, no. 3 (1990): 22–47.
[91] For information on the conversion to and relationship of Africans American and Christianity see Charles Colcock Jones, *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: Thomas Purse, 1842); Albert J. Raboteau, "Religion, Black," in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 24: Race*, eds. Thomas C. Holt, Laurie B. Green, and Charles Reagan Wilson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 131–134; and Frank Lambert, ""I Saw the Book Talk": Slave Readings of the First Great Awakening," *The Journal of African American History* 87 (Winter 2002): 12–25.
[92] Eileen Southern, "An Origin of the Negro Spiritual," *The Black Scholar* 3, no. 3 (1972): 12–13.
[93] African-American preachers during the antebellum period and *griots* had similar roles in their community. *Griots* in Western Africa tradition are seen as leaders due to their position as a repository of the oral tradition. They are known as praise dancers and often would use their vocal abilities to communicate different ideas. Thomas A. Hale, *Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

patterns."[94] In addition, banjos, the instrument most associated with the genre and blues performers, can be traced to the *banjar*, a category of African lutes.[95]

Jazz, Lawal explains, emerged as a mixture between African and European traditions. Many of the carryovers found in spirituals and the blues are also present in jazz. Jazz, however, also incorporates many European instruments, such as the trumpet, trombone, clarinet, piano, violin, step drum, and the guitar (many African Americans learned to play these instruments in military bands during the American Revolution and Civil War).[96] With musical African carryovers such as rhythm, syncopation, and improvisation fusing with the European concepts of melody and harmony, jazz became one of "America's greatest contribution[s] to modern music."[97] African carryovers played an essential role in connecting slaves from different African ethnic backgrounds by creating a culture to which they all could relate. The creation of an African-American culture assisted slaves in coping with their oppressed state and continued to be important to African-American progress after emancipation.

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[94] Lawal, "The African Heritage of African American Art and Performance," 50.

[95]In American architect Benjamin Latrobe's observation of an 1819 performance at Congo Square in New Orleans, he described an instrument he was sure was imported from Africa and resembles the modern day banjo: "on top of the finger board was the rude figure of a man in a sitting posture, & two pegs behind him to which the strings were fastened. The body was a calabash." Benjamin H. B. Latrobe, *Impressions Respecting New Orleans*, ed. S. Wilson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951), 49–50. The banjo became significant in representing African Americans outside of the United States. One of the most interesting examples of this is the use of a banjo to identify an African American character named Jonny in Ernest Krenek's opera J*onny spielt auf*. See Jonathan O. Wipplinger, "Performing Race in Ernest Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf*," in Blackness in Opera eds. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, Eric Saylor (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 243.

[96] Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 64–67. For more on African American's learning to play European instruments see Richard Crawford, "Maintaining Oral Traditions: African Music in Early America," in *America's Musical Life* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 106–107.

[97] Along with contributing to modern music, jazz inspired many of the dances popular at the time. These dances "characterized by complex body movement and footwork" were "reminiscent of the *juba*." Lawal, "The African Heritage of African American Art and Performance," 50–51.

Blackness on Stage: The Minstrel Tradition

Though musical traditions eventually became cornerstones of pride within the African-American community, they were exploited and brought into mainstream American culture through the blackface minstrel tradition in the nineteenth century.[98] Minstrel shows were driven by a fascination white people had with African-American slaves.[99] The relationship between African Americans and white Americans was perplexing.[100] Many white Americans sought to legitimize the dehumanizing institution of slavery even as they believed, as Thomas Jefferson wrote, that slavery had an "unhappy influence on the manners of our people [white Americans]."[101] Polygenesis—the theory that human races are of different origins—and other pseudo-scientific theories used to explain differences between black and white people expose how Du Bois's theory of the veil was perpetuated by white views of black people.[102] These ill-informed views from the veil were then projected on stage, affecting how blackness was presented and perceived in minstrel shows.

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[98] For more on the blackface minstrel tradition in American popular culture see William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1998).
[99] For more on blackface minstrelsy's effects on race relations see Brian Roberts, *Blackface Nation: Race, Reform, and Identity in American Popular Music, 1812–1925* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
[100] For information on the complicated relationship between slaves and slave masters see Norman Yetman, *When I Was a Slave: Memoirs from the Slave Narrative Collection* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2002).
[101] Thomas Jefferson, *Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 288. For more on the justification of slavery see John Craig Hammond, "'Uncontrollable Necessity': The Local Politics, Geopolitics, and Sectional Politics of Slavery Expansion," in *Contesting Slavery: The Politics of Bondage and Freedom in the New American Nation*, ed. John Craig Hammond and Matthew Mason (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 139–160.
[102] For more on pseudo-scientific studies during the nineteenth century see Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: The Slave Daguerreotypes of Louis Agassiz," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 12 (Summer 1996): 102–106.

Besides the obvious use of blackface, race was a fundamental part of minstrel shows. White minstrel performers used African-American music and dance, along with their blackface, as a mask to not only entertain their audiences, but also to "shed conventional manners and behave onstage in ways that polite society found uncivilized," thereby commenting on "black-white interactions...politics, culture, and social class."[103] The financial and social benefits white minstrels reaped when performing in blackface were thus based on a degrading portrayal of African Americans that was conditioned by the veil.

Black characters portrayed in minstrel shows were shallow images of African Americans, portraying only their recognizable habits and playing into negative stereotypes. Minstrel performers would travel and study the mannerisms, music, and dancing of African American slaves, creating characters based on their observations. Often, minstrel shows would capitalize on the supposedly happy nature of African Americans through characters that were typically high-spirited musical and dancing fools. Though there were many, two main types of characters dominated the minstrel scene. Zip Coon and Jim Crow were prominent characters who exemplified these happy and simple-minded caricatures. Opposites of each other, Jim Crow was used to represent the rural slaves down south and Zip Coon was used to represent free slaves in the north. Jim Crow, and slave characters like him, were "contented and secure" on their Southern plantations, while Zip Coon, and Northern black characters like him, were "ignorant, bumbling buffoons who were totally

[103] Richard Crawford, "Blacks, Whites, and the Minstrel Stage," in *America's Musical Life* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 198. See also Rachel Sussman, "The Carnivalizing of Race," *Etnofoor* 14, no. 2 (2001): 79-88.

out of place outside the South."[104] Both characters were boastful yet unaware of their ignorance and lowly status.

Clearly, the veil affected the depth of understanding white minstrels were able to achieve of their African-American subjects. What they were able to grasp was the high-spirited energy of their dancing, singing, and expression. Affected by the veil, white minstrels were unable to see past the African American's blackness. The African carryovers exhibited in African-American music and dance were more than dumb-witted fun; they were also bonding and coping mechanisms during oppressive times. In a statement explaining common misconceptions about African-American behaviors and feelings Frederick Douglass explained:

> They dance and sing, and make all manners of joyful noises—so they do: but it is a great mistake to suppose them happy because they sing. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows, rather than the joys, of his heart…In the most boisterous outbursts of rapturous sentiment, there was ever a tinge of deep melancholy.[105]

In other words, if blackness is a mask that African Americans wore to cope with their oppression, an outward expression of happiness despite sorrow, then they, too, were affected by the veil. Unable to rectify their situation, they had to make the best of it.[106]

Blackness on Stage: Harlem Renaissance Theater

Negative stereotypes perpetuated though the minstrel tradition became one of the main issues Harlem Renaissance playwrights and actors attempted to change on stage.

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[104] Robert C. Toll, "Behind the Blackface: Minstrel Men and Minstrel Myth," *American Heritage* 29, no. 3 (April/May 1978).
[105] Ibid., 199.
[106] This statement has a close relation to the term "signifyin," which is used in African-American discourse to describe a type of wordplay, making something a joke of something taboo. See Scott Ruff, "Signifyin': African-American Language to Landscape," *Thresholds*, no. 35, (2009): 66–69; and Horace J. Maxile, Jr., "Signs, Symphonies, Signifyin(G): African-American Cultural Topics as Analytical Approach to the Music of Black Composers," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, No. 1 (Spring 2008): 123–138.

They wanted to write and play roles that provided alternative views that would shed a more positive light on African Americans while telling stories that resonated with the African-American community. With race consciousness on the rise, the opportunity to change how blackness was viewed on stage was a worthwhile venture. As Montgomery Gregory wrote in 1925:

> Our ideal is a national Negro Theater where the Negro playwright, musician, actor, dancer, and artist in concert shall fashion a drama that will merit the respect and admiration of America. Such an institution must come from the Negro himself, as he alone can truly express the soul of his people…in…the rich veins of folk-tradition of the past and the portrayal of the authentic life of the Negro masses of today.[107]

Theater was seen as a platform that was essential to developing a positive perspective on African-American culture. Just as their blackness and culture had been appropriated on stage by white minstrels, African Americans sought to create a stage where the beauty and richness of their heritage would no longer serve as a joke to white audiences, but a cornerstone of pride.[108]

Faced with many obstacles, the establishment of a strong African-American theater tradition was a slow process. Nellie McKay identifies collaboration issues, negative stereotypes of African Americans, and funding as three major obstacles.[109] Despite their insistence on establishing African-American theater, finding a definition, role, and function for it stirred up controversy among black intellectuals, dramatists, and actors. The argument centered around what would be the nature of their productions. Many groups felt

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[107] Montgomery Gregory, "The Drama of Negro Life," in *The New Negro, An Interpretation*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1925), 159.
[108] The stage was intended to capture the drama of religious ceremonies, retained from African ritual practices, which had become the center of black activities. Nellie McKay, "Black Theater and Drama in the 1920s: Years of Growing Pains," *The Massachusetts Review* 28, no. 4 (Winter 1987): 615.
[109] Ibid., 616.

that they should only portray positive examples of African-American life, while others did not want to limit themselves and wanted to perform plays outside of the black experience. In addition, though African Americans had long been a part of American theater, it was mainly as black characters who were the "butt of white ridicule" in the minstrel tradition.[110] For African American actors who wanted to portray positive representations of their race, African-American theater was, unfortunately, not a lucrative venture. How profits should be used or split was a constant debate. In fact, many African-American entertainers decided to continue to participate in minstrel productions because of the financial opportunity. [111]

In overcoming these obstacles, Du Bois made significant strides in placing African-American art as the cornerstone of a new theater tradition. He called for the "new birth" of theater and felt that the issues it faced were twofold: first, African-American performers were trained to entertain white audiences and, second, black audiences were not demanding authentic African-American dramas.[112] Du Bois thus started his own acting group in 1926, the Krigwa Players. The group performed works that embodied his ideal of African American theater, which was that it should be "about us," "by us," "for us," and "near us."[113]

Alain Locke agreed with many of Du Bois's ideas for African-American theater, but there were a few points to which they disagreed. Locke insisted that black playwrights,

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[110] Ibid., 616.
[111] Many African-American performers attempted to alter negative stereotypes and incorporate progressive messages into their performances. One performer to take note of is Louis Douglas, who dressed in blackface to double his blackness and emphasize it as a mask or view behind the veil. See Leroy Hopkins, "Louis Douglas and the Weimar Reception of Harlemania," in *Germans and African Americans: Two Centuries of Exchange*, ed. Ankle Ortlepp and Larry A. Greene (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 50–69.
[112] McKay, "Black Theater and Drama in the 1920s," 619.
[113] Du Bois, "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theater," *Crisis* 32, no. 3 (July 1926): 134.

despite their "psychological intimacy" with the African-American community, needed to have the ability to emotionally detach from their art. Locke stressed this because he felt that to create great and meaningful art, artists had to "achieve mastery of a detached, artistic point of view, and reveal the inner stresses and dilemmas of these situations."[114] Locke's argument for objectivity was not something Du Bois could agree with, as he had argued many times in favor of art that was "intimate and self-revelatory."[115] What was most important, however, was their agreement on one essential part of the blueprint for new African-American dramas. They both agreed that playwrights and actors must break with "established dramatic conventions" and experiment with folk plays that allowed drama to express the full spectrum of the African-American experience.[116]

Despite the issues plaguing the success of African-American theater, a considerable number of works were produced between 1918 and 1930.[117] Many of these dramas were folk plays addressing race, class, gender, self-struggle, and comedy based on black life.[118] Though the stabilization of African-American theater did not happen until the 1930s and 1940s, the foundation laid by intellectuals such as Du Bois and Locke helped "direct [African Americans] away from narrow self-interests and into directions that would raise the cultural aspirations of the black masses."[119] Positive representations of blackness and black people on stage allowed African Americans to see themselves in ways they had not

[114] McKay, "Black Theater and Drama in the 1920s," 621.
[115] Ibid., 621.
[116] Ibid., 621
[117] For more information on black theater during the Harlem Renaissance see Freda L. Scott, "Black Drama and the Harlem Renaissance," *Theatre Journal* 37, no. 4 (December 1985): 426–439.
[118] For more on African-American performance practice see Gale Jackson, "The Way We Do: A Preliminary Investigation of the African Roots of African American Performance," *Black American Literature Forum* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 11–22.
[119] McKay, "Black Theater and Drama in the 1920s," 621.

before.[120] The hopes of the black theater were that it would encourage African Americans to do more and be more than what society had taught and designated them to be.

Blackness on Stage: Opera

The portrayal of blackness was not limited to blackface minstrel shows, but was a part of opera as well. Black characters in opera, as in traditional theater, were often distorted. They tended to have personality flaws or to be judged in relation to the majority. In this section, I discuss how opera has presented blackness from the perspective of the veil. Although some composers tried to change how these characters were viewed, they were unable to do so, mostly due to fact they were unable to establish a uniform moral standard for black as well as white characters.

Naomi André addresses the distortion of black characters in nineteenth and early twentieth-century operas, including Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello* (1887), Ernest Krenek's *Jonny spielt auf* (1926), and George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* (1935).[121] Otello is introduced as a hero, but is flawed by his "darker, baser instincts."[122] Krenek's Jonny is flawed through his hyper-sexuality, exhibited in his unwanted advances towards Anita, and his materialistic nature, exhibited through the theft of Daniello's violin. Porgy, André suggests, loses heroism and "manliness" when Bess chooses to run away with Sportin'

[120] For information on the social effects of African Americans on stage see Walter White, "The Negro on the American Stage," *The English Journal* 24, no. 3 (March 1935): 179–188.
[121] Naomi André, "From Otello to Porgy: Blackness, Masculinity, and Morality in Opera," in *Blackness in Opera* eds. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, Eric Saylor (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 11–31.
[122] This is reiterated at the end of *Otella* through a low E-natural in the double basses. As André writes: "The dignified, elegant Otello we first saw in the opening scene is now gone…heralded by the lowest and darkest bass sound possible. He is no longer the sympathetic figure we saw in the opening of the opera...Whatever goodness this tenor once possessed has been purged, his inner darkness now matching his external complexion." Ibid., 16.

Life and Porgy temporarily goes to jail.[123] As André writes, "tragically, he [Porgy] remains deficient in every way; his body is still crippled, he has learned to love only to be duped, and his heart is newly broken."[124]

André goes on to describe how black antiheroes and white antiheroes are treated differently in operas. She argues that the moral compasses by which they are judged are different.[125] By comparing white operatic antiheroes, Alban Berg's Wozzeck and Benjamin Britten's Peter Grimes, to black antiheroes, Krenek's Jonny and Gershwin's Porgy, she determines that what differentiates the two are "the conditions that surround their lost innocence."[126] While all of these characters are "violent and sympathetic," the white characters are afforded their humanity because their misdeeds are not expected by the audience and both characters are, ultimately, punished for those deeds. Jonny and Porgy, however, fall victim to an audience's view of them from the veil. Both operas end triumphantly, but these heroic endings support the "moral bankruptcy" of black characters:[127]

> The black antiheroes lose their heroism and survive through deception and trickery as they elude a greater moral justice. Jonny and Porgy are antiheroic survivors who entertain us so we fail to remember that they have not paid the price of their actions. As the black characters divert us with song, dance, and negative stereotypes, we are shuffled away from opera and pushed closer into minstrelsy. By presenting aspects of minstrel caricature, they make us forget that opera aims to emulate truer-to-life emotions, feelings, and experiences.[128]

Though the intentions of these white composers may have been to present a more sympathetic reading of these black characters, they end up falling back into the territory of

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[123] Ibid., 22.
[124] Ibid., 23.
[125] "Judged by a different moral, compass, their failings do not reinforce the complexity of their humanity, but rather supports a reading that sustains their "inherently inferior" nature." Ibid., 26.
[126] Ibid., 26.
[127] Ibid., 26.
[128] Ibid., 26.

the appropriation of African-American themes. The fact that these characters do not answer for their shortcomings presents them in a different light than their white counterparts.

André concludes that white characters and black characters are judged differently because of a different moral compass, which, I argue, is a result of a view from the veil. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of how blackness is presented in opera, the strategies of mastery of form and deformation of mastery are useful tools. When applying these strategies to the works of black composers, we better see how and why Krenek and Gershwin's attempts at presenting authentic blackness were ultimately unsuccessful.

Conclusion

By the time William Grant Still composed *Blue Steel*, blackness on stage had been influenced by years of negative stereotypes that had been promoted and believed to be authentic representations of black people. The veil, already affecting the audience due to its visual component, was integrated in performances of blackness on stage. In minstrel shows, blackness was implied through blackface and African carryovers were made into a joke. In operas, black characters were treated as the "other" and was therefore held to a different moral standard.[129]

Harlem Renaissance activists, composers, and entertainers strove to combat these preconceived notions in performance practices and in the content of their works. Adapting progressive ideals and a Pan-African experience to the stage, however, would not be easy. They had to be careful not to darken already murky water, since African carryovers had

[129] Porgy, although a member of the community, was still looked at as "other" due to his disabilities.

already been incorporated on stage in ways that diminished their worth. As scholar Gayle Murchison writes:

> The use of their own cultural traditions could be a doubled-edged sword. Such actions could give their worlds a degree of authenticity and credibility that their white counterparts could not claim, yet, should they falter, they would merely reinforce prevailing beliefs about the capabilities of African Americans."[130]

Despite the challenges ahead of them, leaders in the Harlem Renaissance set out to rewrite how blackness was seen. Drawing from Pan-African cultures, traditions, and carryovers, they had the ability to address blackness in a different way that would no longer subject black characters to the status of the "other" and would thus temporarily lift the veil. In William Grant Still's *Blue Steel*, he is able to lift the veil by displaying blackness in a complex rather than a stereotyped way.

[130] Murchison, "New Paradigms in William Grant Still's Blue Steel," 142.

Chapter Four: Lifting the Veil: Blackness in William Grant Still's *Blue Steel*

William Grant Still was first exposed to opera in 1912 and it had a profound effect on him. He enjoyed listening to Red Seal recordings of operas composed by Wagner and Puccini as he lay on the floor of his childhood home, and it became imperative for him to become an opera composer from the first day his step-father brought home those recordings.[131] Still attended Wilberforce University for his Bachelor of Science degree with the intention of becoming a doctor, which was largely at the behest of his mother, but spent a considerable amount of time self-studying opera scores and watching performances in Dayton and Cincinnati from the gallery of the theater.[132]

Though Still produced the majority of his musical output after the Harlem Renaissance, its ideals permeated his work, especially his operas. In the 1920s, Still and other African American composers, authors, and playwrights, including Shirley Graham Du Bois, Harry Lawrence Freeman, and Clarence Cameron White, began to think about how to establish an African American opera tradition.[133] They felt that opera would be the perfect art to bring together all of the best African American art forms. Though black musical theater had made strides in race relations, with successes at home and abroad, a

[131] Beverly Soll, *I Dream a World: The Operas of William Grant Still* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2005, 15. Still describes the moment he found his purpose as "when my step-father brought many of the early Red Seal recording for our home record library. I knew then that I would be happy only if someday I could compose operatic music." Ibid., 12.
[132] Ibid.,13.
[133] Murchison, "New Paradigms in William Grant Still's *Blue Steel*," 143.

specifically African American opera would be able to strip "all traces of minstrelsy and buffoonery and have no traces of the lowbrow comedy and raciness."[134]

By embracing the history and traditions of African diasporic cultures, William Grant Still and his librettist, Bruce Forsythe, created a complex reading of blackness in the opera *Blue Steel*.[135] Still presents a specifically African-American conflict between tradition and modernity in the European-derived form of opera, thus lifting the veil, exploring double-consciousness, and exhibiting "mastery of form." An analysis of the role of each character in the opera and the character's relation to themes that span all of Still's operas reveals the internal conflict that was one of the primary focuses of the Harlem Renaissance.

Process and Themes in the Operas of William Grant Still

Still is credited with composing eight operas, although he also wrote others that he discarded because he felt they were inadequate.[136] Unfortunately, much of the information on the process of writing *Blue Steel* is not available in his diaries, which he kept while writing his works, due to a large entry gap.[137] However, what is made clear in his diary entries is that Still was a well-organized composer and maintained a very close working relationship with his librettists. He held the relationship between composer and librettist in

[134] However, many leaders of the Harlem Renaissance had differing views as to how to make this work. Scholar Gayle Murchison summarizes their debates in the question of "What would constitute a specifically African American opera aesthetic?" Ibid., 143.
[135] *Blue Steel* is credited as Still's first opera; however, Still wrote at least one before it while in college. The opera was never published and no known score exist.
[136] Soll, *I Dream a World*, 11.
[137] The composer's diaries provide insight into the works and the importance they had in his life. Beverly Soll claims these diaries are "the most valuable sources for the study of the composer," as they are a "practical calendar" and "record research for the libretti, catalog a daily record of Still's progress on new works…and finally, show the efforts he made to find suitable performances for his creations." Soll, *I Dream a World*, 21.

high regard and stressed the importance of communication and the librettist's availability for consultation. At times he felt stifled by the writing of his first two collaborators, Bruce Forsythe (*Blue Steel*) and Langston Hughes (*Troubled Island*), but found his ideal composer-librettist relationship with Verna Arvey, his second wife, who collaborated with him on his last six operas. The two of them developed a process for their collaborations. Although *Blue Steel* was written prior to their collaboration, their process does offer a sense of the importance that each part of the process played in the creation of Still's operas.

In a draft of an article about his opera *Highway 1, U.S.A.* (1963), located in the Still-Arvey papers, Still outlines this process. Still would first research different locations until he found one that offered "sufficient color and variety to generate an interesting plot."[138] He would then research its peoples and customs, including musical idioms. From there, a plot and a skeleton of the libretto, which was subject to change, would evolve. Simultaneously, Still would be constructing miniature sets that helped his plot continue to take shape. During the fifth step, after the plot had settled, he focused on the melodic content of the opera and began placing its recitatives and arias. He believed that "one of the most important factors in the long life and popular appeal of the standard operas is their melodic interest." It was not until the sixth step that Arvey would enter the process. With the skeleton of the libretto ready, she would write the dialogue and then pick lines for the beginnings of the arias, which Still would take into his last step to develop musically. Music completed, he and Arvey collaborated on the rest of the text, altering it and the music so that each conformed to the other.[139]

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[138] Article draft, "*Highway 1, USA.,*" Box 69, Still-Arvey Papers.
[139] Soll, *I Dream a World*, 32–33.

The themes of his operas reflect Still's own life and philosophies. Soll has argued that the operas "explore, in a variety of contexts, the injustices and prejudices that the composer encountered throughout his life and share a vision of the world he dreamed might be possible."[140] Soll summarizes six recurring themes as follows: conflicting values, betrayal and retribution, dreams of a new world, exploration of religion and spiritualism, love and friendship, and simple people caught up in tragic drama.[141] All six of these themes are integral to the story of *Blue Steel* and would have resonated with Still's target audience, the African-American community, by relating to issues it was facing at the time the opera was composed in 1934.[142]

The first theme—conflicting values—addresses the conflict I discussed in Chapter 2 as embodied in the differences between the views of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois and between Countee Cullen's and Langston Hughes' poems: double consciousness. The second theme—betrayal and retribution—though encompassing themes prevalent throughout the opera tradition, does specially address the contempt held for people who are different from the majority, a result of the veil. Dreaming of a new world is a hint at the reconciliation of not only both sides of an African American's consciousness, but of African Americans and American society as a whole. In exploring religion and spiritualism, Still addresses not only the importance of these themes in the African-American community, but also the religious traditions that survived the African

[140] Ibid., 37.
[141] Ibid., 37–38.
[142] In their search for an African American opera aesthetic, artists kept in mind their social aims, "to combat racial prejudice and promote interracial understanding," while providing a "dramatic subject" that the African American community, "their targeted audience," would be familiar with. Murchison, "New Paradigms in William Grant Still's *Blue Steel*," 143.

slave trade. A connection to a divine source is supplemented through Still's use of drums in *Blue Steel*, which are used in religious ceremonies and are "portrayed as a powerful force."[143] The last two themes—love and friendship and simple people caught up in tragic drama—are themes prevalent in many operas, although the last connects in a special way with the African-American community given their history in the United States as addressed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Background and Synopsis of *Blue Steel*

Blue Steel was composed at an interesting time in his life. He had just been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, divorced from his wife Grace, and moved to Los Angeles. In 1929 he reconnected with his former collaborator, pianist, composer, and writer Bruce Forsythe. Still wanted to write an opera with a "dramatic story" and "effective libretto."[144] Although he wanted to avoid any qualities that resembled musical theater, he asked one of his old musical theater associates, Carlton Moss (1909–1997), to write the scenario for his opera. Moss was a playwright and actor Still had met during his time in New York. He spent most of his career combating negative stereotypes and discrimination by presenting African-American actors in serious roles outside of the old minstrel show tradition.[145] Moss was an ideal collaborator for Still as he believed in the same ideals that Still wanted to include in his operas.

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[143] Soll, *I Dream a World*, 40.
[144] Murchison, "New Paradigms in William Grant Still's *Blue Steel*," 148.
[145] Ibid., 142. For more on Carlton Moss see Thomas Cripps and David Culbert, "*The Negro Soldier* (1944): Film Propaganda in Black and White," in *Hollywood As Historian: American Film in a Cultural Context*, ed. Peter C. Rollins (Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 1983); Fredrick Weldon Bond, *The Negro and the Drama* (Beloit: McGrath, 1969), 163.; and Robert McG Thomas Jr., "Carlton Moss, 88, Who Filmed The Black Experience, Dies," *New York Times,* August 15, 1997.

After Moss provided the scenario, Still enlisted Forsythe to help him with the libretto. Though it is not truly known why Still did not keep Moss on for the libretto, Forsythe was a proved collaborator for Still. He and Forsythe had previously collaborated on his ballet, *Sahdji* (1930). In addition, Forsythe, as a composer himself, was already familiar with the operatic tradition, held similar beliefs as Still, and lived in Los Angeles, which made collaborating easier. Still was excited about this new work and wrote in his "Autobiographical Manuscript," found in the Still-Arvey papers: "This time, I was sure, I'd have an opera that would be worth saving and worth producing. I was enthusiastic, and there was a deep satisfaction in being able to work uninterruptedly at last."[146]

Blue Steel, in which all characters are black, is the story of a man from the city, Blue Steel, who finds a swamp community after helping one of its ill members get back to it. Blue Steel does not think much of the community or its people due to their simplicity and beliefs, but he does take a liking to the daughter of the High Priest of their Voodoo cult, Neola.[147] Blue Steel and Neola secretly meet up and fall in love, though Blue Steel's love of himself remains greater than his love of Neola. He promises Neola he will take her to a new world that is filled with beauty, jazz, wine, and silk clothing, but the most important thing that waits for her outside the swamp is the freedom to love him. Neola, however, is unsure of his love and even more fearful of what her gods will do if she betrays them.

After planning to leave with Blue Steel that night, Neola is approached by Doshy, one of the oldest members of the cult, who pleads with Neola to stay with the cult, for if

[146] Ibid., 149.
[147] Based on the libretto, I believe this form of voodoo is more closely related to Haitian Vodou than West African Vodun. The periodic use of French spellings and most importantly the names of the gods point to Haiti being the origin of the religion used in this opera.

she leaves with Blue Steel, he will die. Out of love for him, Neola agrees to stay and she and Doshy leave to attend the Ceremony of Renewal taking place that evening. When Neola does not show up to meet Blue Steel, he goes to the temple, interrupting the ceremony, to retrieve her. Neola begs him to leave, but he refuses and shoots and kills her father, Venable, before running off with her. At this point in the opera, the drums begin to sound, weaving Blue Steel's fate.

By the river, Blue Steel has prepared a boat to leave, but Neola suggests they take the path by land due to snags in the river. Blue Steel is determined to leave by boat, but the drums have taken full effect and begin to drive him crazy. Doshy and the cult stand nearby chanting, enhancing the power of the drums, which are the Voice of Damballah. Blue Steel attempts to escape not only the island, but also the drums by leaping into the river, but he is caught in quicksand and dies. The opera ends as the drums cease and Neola screams. In triumph, Doshy and the cult proclaim the Voice of Damballah.

The themes Soll identified across Still's eight operas are present on the surface of *Blue Steel* and are integrated throughout the plot. However, the overarching theme of the story is conflicting values. In 1934, a *Los Angeles Times* article about Still winning the Guggenheim Fellowship and working on this opera noted:

> The new opera, like others of Still's works, is based on his people's themes and rhythms but has a decidedly modern-European influence. The story of *Blue Steel* begins with the African jungle and leads on to the other phases of the life of the Negro in the world. It treats of certain voodoo practices and present an interesting light on Negro psychology.[148]

The "Negro psychology" the writer refers to seems to be Du Bois's double consciousness. Murchison makes note of this connection, stating that "Du Bois's ideas and activism and

[148] "Afro-American Composer Here to Write New Opera," *Los Angeles Times*, n.d., Scrapbook, vol. 4 (1934–35), Still-Arvey Papers.

the passages in Locke's *New Negro* serve as instructive guides for understanding *Blue Steel*, its music, tropes, and signifiers, in the context of the Harlem Renaissance."[149] In the following sections, I use Du Bois's theories of the veil and double consciousness to analyze the deeper meanings of several of the characters and objects present in *Blue Steel*. Based on the relationships between the characters, I argue that Venable represents tradition, Blue Steel represents modernity, Neola represents double-consciousness, and Doshy serves as the moral compass for them all. The interactions of these characters present a different understanding of blackness than in the operas of white composers from around the same time.

Venable

Venable is on stage only in Act Two of *Blue Steel*, but his presence is felt throughout the opera. He is the High Priest of the cult and the father of Neola. He is described only as a "dignified elderly man."[150] It can be inferred that this man warrants respect in his community due to his high status, but it is likely that Still intentionally gives little information about him because of how little African Americans at that time knew about their African roots. Priests in the Vodou religion are known as *houngan*.[151] Venable, who is a High Priest, would be more specifically known as a *houngan asogwe*. The primary jobs of *houngan asogwe*, aside from initiating other priest(esses), is to preserve rituals and songs as well as sustain the relationship between the community and the spirits.

[149] Murchison, "New Paradigms in William Grant Still's *Blue Steel*," 153.
[150] William Grant Still, *Blue Steel* [Libretto] (Flagstaff: William Grant Still Music, 1934), 2.
[151] George Eaton Simpson, "Four Vodun Ceremonies," *The Journal of American Folklore* 59, no. 232 (Apr–Jun 1946): 154.

With this in mind, Venable becomes the physical embodiment of tradition. Neola, as the daughter of the High Priest, is thus said to be "hedged by sacred vows," and when Blue Steel comes for her Venable says:

> In this place are gathered the laws of ages,
> They know you not,
> For your soul is black
> And your lips reek blasphemy,
> Neola is sacred.
> None may command her,
> Save the gods through me, her father.[152]

Not only has Venable associated himself with "the laws of ages," the gods, but he has also asserted that those gods do not know Blue Steel because his soul is empty and his lips speak against tradition. Most importantly, Venable asserts that Neola's role in their community is important, which I will discuss further in a subsequent section. If Venable and the gods represent African tradition, then Blue Steel knows of his heritage but has no connection to it. Blue Steel is thus like the descendants of African slaves who retained aspects of the culture of their ancestral home even as their ancestral home had no knowledge of them because of the hybrid nature of their being. This is further reinforced by the fact that whenever the gods speak it is always through the drums, a musical symbol of Africa. Venable is the connection between his community and their African ancestors.[153]

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[152] Still, *Blue Steel*, 25.

[153] In his speech, Venable also acknowledges that the temple is a place of tradition and Blue Steel has no connection to it. He further emphasizes this when he says that Blue Steel's "soul is black," which speaks to his evil nature and the emptiness of his soul. With one last plea, Venable ask Blue Steel to leave the temple to which he replies: "Time trembles with impatience at these useless mouthings./One side!/ Blue Steel claims his bride!" Ibid., 25.

Blue Steel

Blue Steel is prideful, strong, and fearless. He finds his way to this hidden village in a swamp and immediately becomes its antagonist. Blue Steel mocks the beliefs of the cult living in the village and openly shows his contempt for them. However, he takes interest in Neola, the young daughter of the cult's High Priest. They meet secretly in the woods and he convinces her to run away with him. Despite her loyalty to her father and the cult, Blue Steel is able to chip away at her heart with promises of love and rebukes her beliefs as fallacies:

> Little one, those words are foolish.
> You know, tonight, I take you away,
> For I am more god than your gods!
> Gods of the weak-tongued drums, beware!
> Your voice split!
> Where are your ears,
> That you hear not my words?
> Where are your eyes,
> Your beating is lost on the face of my strength!
> My strength![154]

Through his actions and tirades, Blue Steel becomes the representative of modernity. This is further supported by the fact he is the only character to bring a modern object, a revolver, into the primitive setting of the swamp.

Blue Steel's relationship with Neola offers commentary on the pull of the American side of "twoness." Blue Steel claims the superiority of his modern beliefs over Neola's traditional beliefs and later sells Neola dreams of a world of beauty just for her.[155] Neola is apprehensive and unsure of Blue Steel's intentions. As Blue Steel "embraces her

[154] Still, *Blue Steel*, 5.
[155] Ibid., 7.

savagely [stage direction]," Neola exclaims: "Your hot touch is like the drums!/I fear it with a stranger fear./But want of it is stronger than my terror."[156] Neola, like many African Americans, wanted to embrace American society, but did not feel right about this given their past experiences. Despite this fear, they still wanted to find a way to be fully embraced in American society.

When Blue Steel finally meets his opposition, Venable, he is fearless and is assertive in what he wants. As he calls for Neola, he blasphemes the sacred temple: "your laws are weak and frail as a mist."[157] For Blue Steel, the laws of the cult are not meaningful and are easily broken, an expression of how the African tradition fared in America.

Neola

Neola is described as a "mulatto of pure character" and is the daughter of Venable, the High Priest of the cult.[158] Her love for Blue Steel puts her in a unique position. Neola is stuck between her love for Blue Steel, the representative of modernity, and her devotion to her father, the representative of tradition. Her ethnicity and position in the opera suggest she is the representative of double consciousness. Both Blue Steel and Venable fall victim to their opposition, while Neola, the only character to embrace both sides, is the last standing.

Neola recognizes, with the help of Doshy, the importance of perseveration of tradition, exemplified by how she is directed to stand by her father's side when Blue Steel

[156] Ibid., 5.
[157] Ibid., 24.
[158] Ibid., 2.

blasphemes the cult and how she attempts to stand between Blue Steel and her father when Blue Steel threatens Venable. The relationship between Neola and her father, Venable, is explored very little in the opera; in fact, they never speak to one another directly. However, their connection at the moment she steps in to save his life is undeniable. It is much like the connection many African Americans had to Africa up until the Harlem Renaissance: though the connection was there, a true reconciliation, or conversation, had never taken place. As Neola stands between the two men, she is not only protecting her father, but also attempting to save Blue Steel's life. If Blue Steel succeeds in killing her father, a connection to his heritage, he would die. Renewed in her beliefs, she replies to Blue Steel's attempt to win her over: "I am yet stronger; it is for you I plead."[159]

Many African Americans faced similar issues to Neola on their path to self-realization and their reconciliation of two souls. Though Blue Steel's death was literal in the opera, African Americans' deaths would be on a spiritual level. As the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance suggest, in owning and redefining what it meant to be an African American, especially in the age of modernism, African Americans needed to embrace their heritage. In *Blue Steel*, the character Doshy is a constant reminder of this duty.

Doshy

Doshy is one of the elders of the cult and plays a role similar to female diviners of African tribes. She is also seen as a confidant and a moral compass for Neola. Physically described as "aged" and a "very black Negress," Doshy often speaks in riddles and holds unique spiritual powers that garner the respect of other members of the cult.[160] Deeply

[159] Ibid., 24.
[160] Ibid., 2.

connected to tradition and the gods, many of Doshy's riddles speak to the truth of the characters' circumstances. This further indicates her role as the moral compass of the opera despite her antagonistic qualities.

Though she voices disdain for Blue Steel, it is truly his rejection of tradition that troubles Doshy. When she tries convincing Neola not to run away with him, she first appeals to Neola as her friend, claiming that Blue Steel's love for her is a front and that he is only trying to lure her way from the cult. When this does not work, she appeals to Neola's sense of duty. This plea falls on deaf ears as well. Now Doshy must employ the powers of the gods: "as your friend have I spoken unheard. Now with the voice of Ayida, I command! Flee not with this man!"[161] Doshy, who is now connected more directly with the spirits, speaks to Neola about all of Blue Steel's shortcomings and gives an ominous prophecy about his fate if Neola chooses to leave with him. She urges Neola to listen to the drums, which begin to sound as Neola makes one final defiant cry in defense of her love for Blue Steel.

The drums, Doshy says, are calling "for vengeance on those who betray," for Blue Steel's blasphemies have written his fate.[162] Doshy speaks of his false sense of strength and self, hidden in his contemptuous words, when she says: "he thinks his soul is deep and strong/As a cavern, vast and still," suggesting that what he thinks is his strength, his rejection of his heritage, is really his weakness.[163] Blue Steel believed the people of the cult were weak in mind and body due to their belief in gods, but because they have a connection to their heritage, they actually have a better sense of self, making them the

[161] Ibid., 10.
[162] Ibid., 11.
[163] Ibid., 12.

stronger group. Thus, only if Neola decides that she will stay with the cult and maintain a connection to her heritage can he be saved. This emphasizes the importance of African Americans reconnecting and reconciling with their African heritage in order to have a better future.[164] Doshy's words speak to the consequences of Neola's betrayal:

> See him fleeing through the swamp,
> Light of foot,
> Stout of heart.
> See him stop, gasp and call,
> …….
> Hear the death in his sobbing cries.
> …….
> See him die.
> But rest in death, he shall not have.
> Cold fingers rob him of his soul,
> And send his body roaming,

The first part of this passage describes Blue Steel's strength and the second part describes how it will fail him. His strength will shrivel into cries for help as he is overcome by a force greater than himself. This force, however, will not take his body, but only his soul. He will become a pit of the man he used to be, living out the commands of another. [165] Without a sense of self, Blue Steel will be living his life as a lost man. Doshy is the

[164] Arthur A. Schomburg wrote in his essay "The Negro Digs Up His Past," featured in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*: "The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future…. History must restore what slavery took away for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset. So among the rising democratic millions we find the Negro thinking more collectively, more retrospectively than the rest, and apt out of the very pressure of the present to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all." Quoted in Murchison, "New Paradigms in William Grant Still's *Blue Steel*," 152.

[165] These consequences are closely related to the beliefs held about zombies in the Haitian Vodou religion. The myth is believed to have begun around the beginning years of the African slave trade during the French colonization of Haiti in 1612 and was a representation of the African slaves' feelings of relentless misery and subjugation. Many slaves contemplated death as a way to be set free, but believed by committing suicide they would be condemned to skulk the Hispaniola plantations for eternity, an undead slave at once denied their own bodies and yet trapped inside them—a soulless zombie. After 1804 the myth became a part of Haitian folklore and evolved into the Vodou religion as a state induced by a *bokor*, a sorcerer, to maintain control over his subject and use them as free labor. The zombie became a symbol of the nation's history of slavery and the fear of its reinstatement. For more see Sarah Juliet Lauro, "Slavery and Slave Rebellion: The (Pre)History of the Zombi/e," in *The Transatlantic Zombie* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 27–63.

character that reminds us that a connection with one's heritage is a necessity to live out a meaningful life.

Two Souls, One God and His River

The relationship between Africa and African Americans is a topic of importance throughout the entire opera, strengthening its connection to the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance. Still and Forsythe's exploration of double consciousness takes place not only through the relationships between characters, but also in the settings chosen for each act and the gods who speak through the drums. Inanimate objects in this opera contribute to the life of the opera by providing context and extra insight into the gift and curse of double-consciousness. Two items, the revolver and the drums, have already been discussed in relation to tradition and modernity; however, the setting of each act and the god Damballah, who speaks through the drums, provide additional frames for the relationship of tradition, modernity, and morality explored in the opera. All three acts accentuate the strengths or weaknesses of the characters associated with these objects, but the third act offers an answer to the resolution of these two opposing views.

Act One takes place near a swamp during the afternoon. Blue Steel begins to entice Neola to run away with him with descriptions of the world that awaits her outside her community. Though he promises her a new world, the setting provides a contrast to what he could offer her. A swamp is a wetland partially covered with water and is also a metaphor for a difficult or troublesome situation or subject.[166] This uncultivated area draws a connection to Blue Steel's lack of heritage and wisdom. Though a swamp is covered with

[166] *Merriam Webster*, "Swamp," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/swamp, March 17, 2018.

water, as the definition suggests, it is only partial and the flow is not continuous or steady. With this understanding, if Neola was to leave with Blue Steel, survival in this new world would be difficult without him first establishing a stronger connection to his heritage.

Act Two takes place in a voodoo temple during the Ceremony of Renewal. The temple is an obvious symbol framing the theme of tradition and the Haitian Vodou religion. This building represents the structure provided by a connection to heritage. When Blue Steel bursts into this temple and interrupts the ceremony, it is a commentary on how modernity interacts with tradition. This is reinforced by Blue Steel's use of the revolver—a modern technology—to kill Venable before kidnapping Neola. However, at the end we see that it is not possible to be fully stripped of tradition. Though Blue Steel was able to kill Venable in the temple, when he tries to escape via the river and tries to shoot at the cult members who are in pursuit of the couple, the bullets do not hit and disappear into the air.

The most important, and present, of all the symbols in the opera is the god Damballah.[167] Damballah in the Haitian Vodou religion is the creator of life, ruler of the mind and intellect, and creator of cosmic equilibrium. As the creator of all the waters on Earth, he is said to bring about peace and harmony. His role in this opera is essential to the story and outcomes of all characters. It is him who brings Blue Steel to the community by allowing him through the river into it. When Blue Steel scoffs at his opportunity to gain wisdom and a connection to his heritage, it is also Damballah who prevents him from leaving via the river. Damballah thus attempts to give knowledge to Blue Steel and bring

[167] For more on Damballah and other Vodou gods see Richard Brent Turner, "The Haiti-New Orleans Vodou Connection: Zora Neale Hurston as Initiate Observer," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 112–133.

about a sense of equilibrium, but when Blue Steel refuses these gifts and instead disrespects the gods, Damballah chooses to drive him mad.

Still shows how this is accomplished in the last scene of the opera, "The Dreams Weave the Spell of Death," by incorporating drums. Up until this point, the drums were never sounded while Blue Steel sung. After Blue Steel attempts to pray to God for help and his prayers go unanswered, Doshy sings "Sound the word anew," bringing in the drums, to which Blue Steel replies: "Damnation! I can't pray! My prayer is hollow and empty."[168] Damballah, through the drums, has finally penetrated Blue Steel's mind.

The drums play a polyrhythmic ostinato (Example 1), which is an African carryover, throughout the scene as Blue Steel is driven crazier.[169] The ostinato is played by three different pitched drums—high, medium, and low—much like in many West African drumming traditions. Also present throughout the scene is the recurring chanting of the line "the taker of life has no longer a life" by the chorus, reminding Blue Steel of his choice to disconnect from his heritage.[170]

Over the drums and chanting in this scene, Neola tries to calm Blue Steel, but the two characters are no longer in sync. When they first sing together in the scene, they are singing similar words, in the same rhythm, an octave apart (Example 2). This further emphasizes the conflicting views within African Americans. The music they sing together represents the soul, while the text represents the irreconcilable differences of each half. However, the next time they sing together, after the drums have begun to affect Blue Steel,

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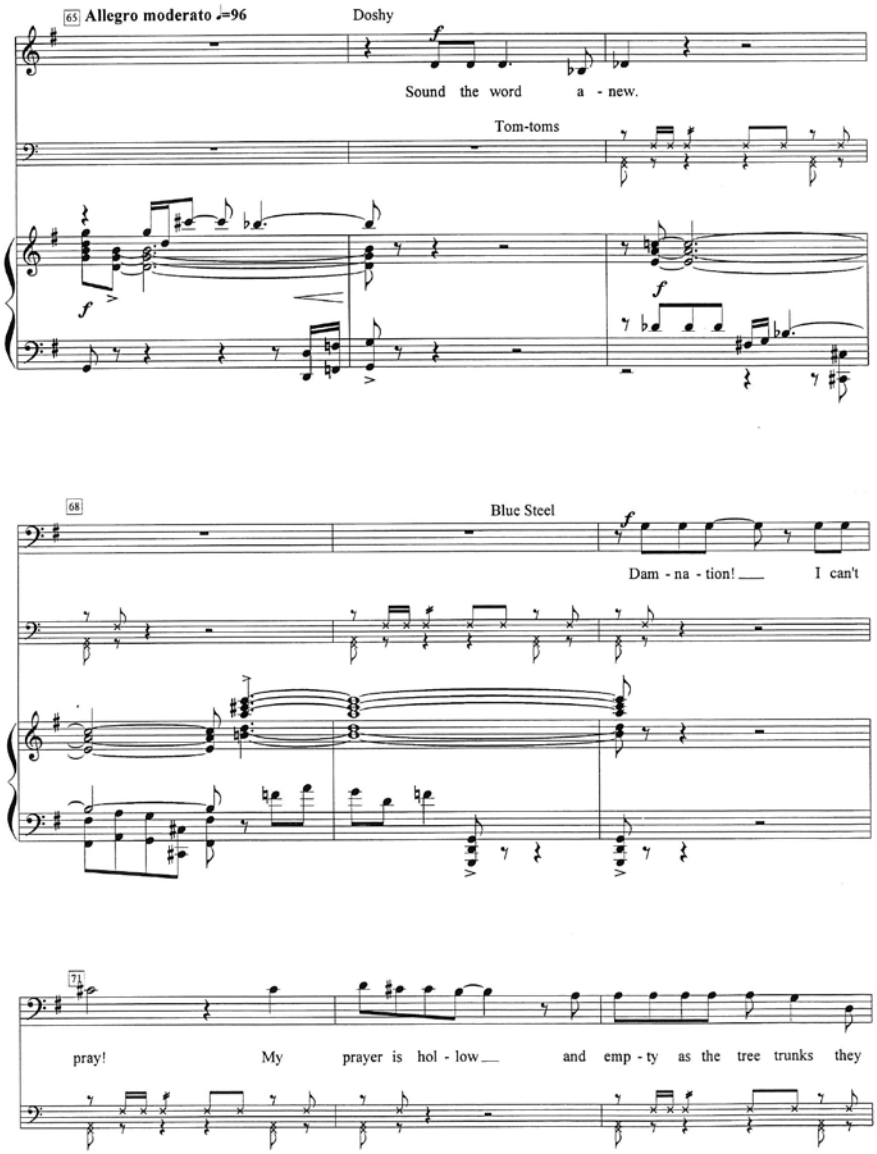
[168] Still, *Blue Steel*, 34.
[169] All musical examples taken from William Grant Still, "The Drums Weave the Spell of Death," in *Arias, Duets, and Scenes from the Operas of William Grant Still*, vol. 3, ed. Beverly Soll (Flagstaff: William Grant Still Music, 1998).
[170] Still, *Blue Steel*, 35.

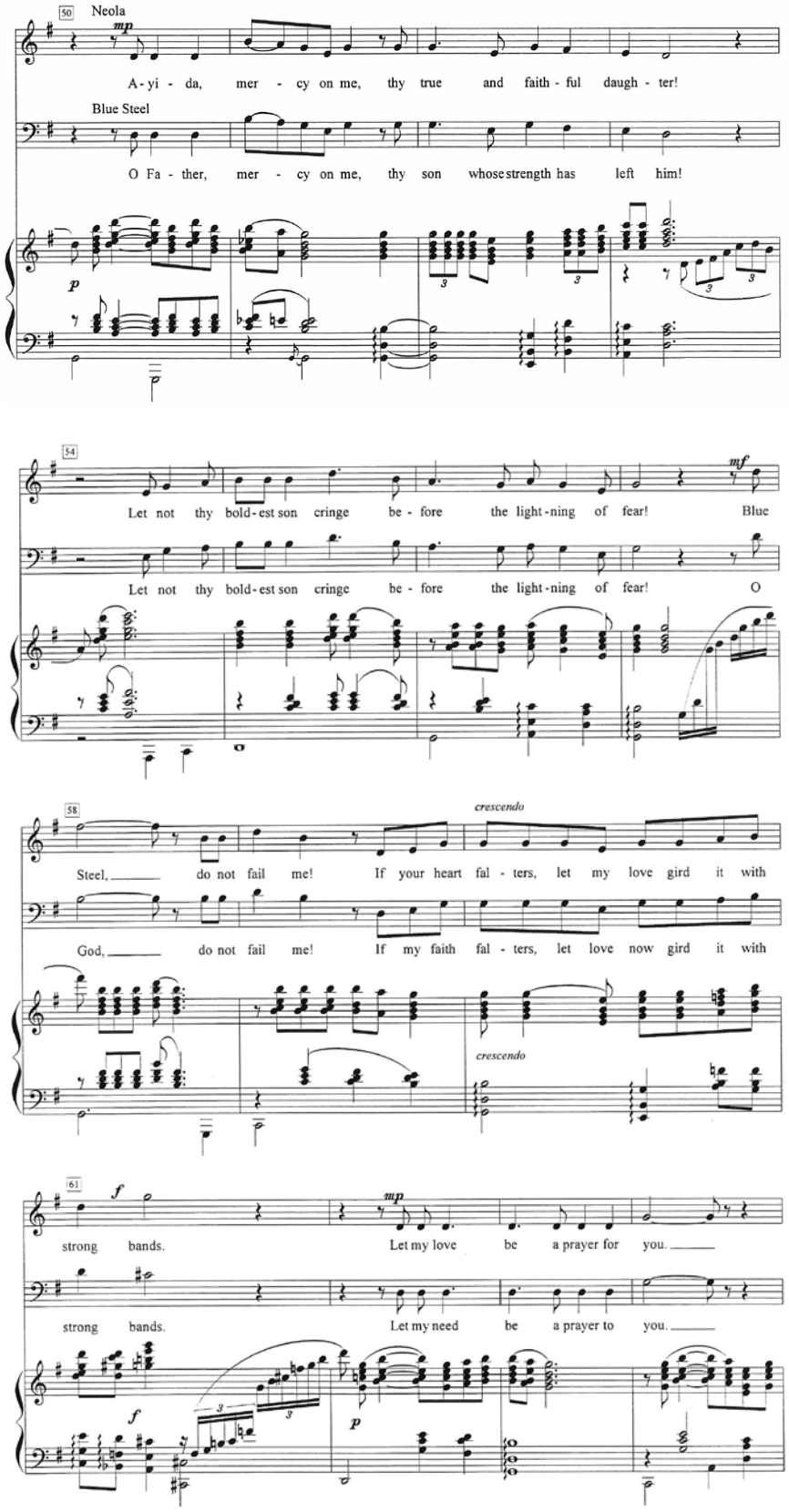
they never fully unite in singing together until their last words, which bring them back to an octave apart on C# (Example 3).[171] By this time Blue Steel is lost and no longer has control of himself. He does not recognize Neola anymore. Blue Steel then dies by sinking into quicksand, which represents the loss of his sense of self. He is reclaimed by the earth.

Example 1. William Grant Still, "The Drums Weave the Spell of Death" from *Blue Steel*, mm. 65–73.

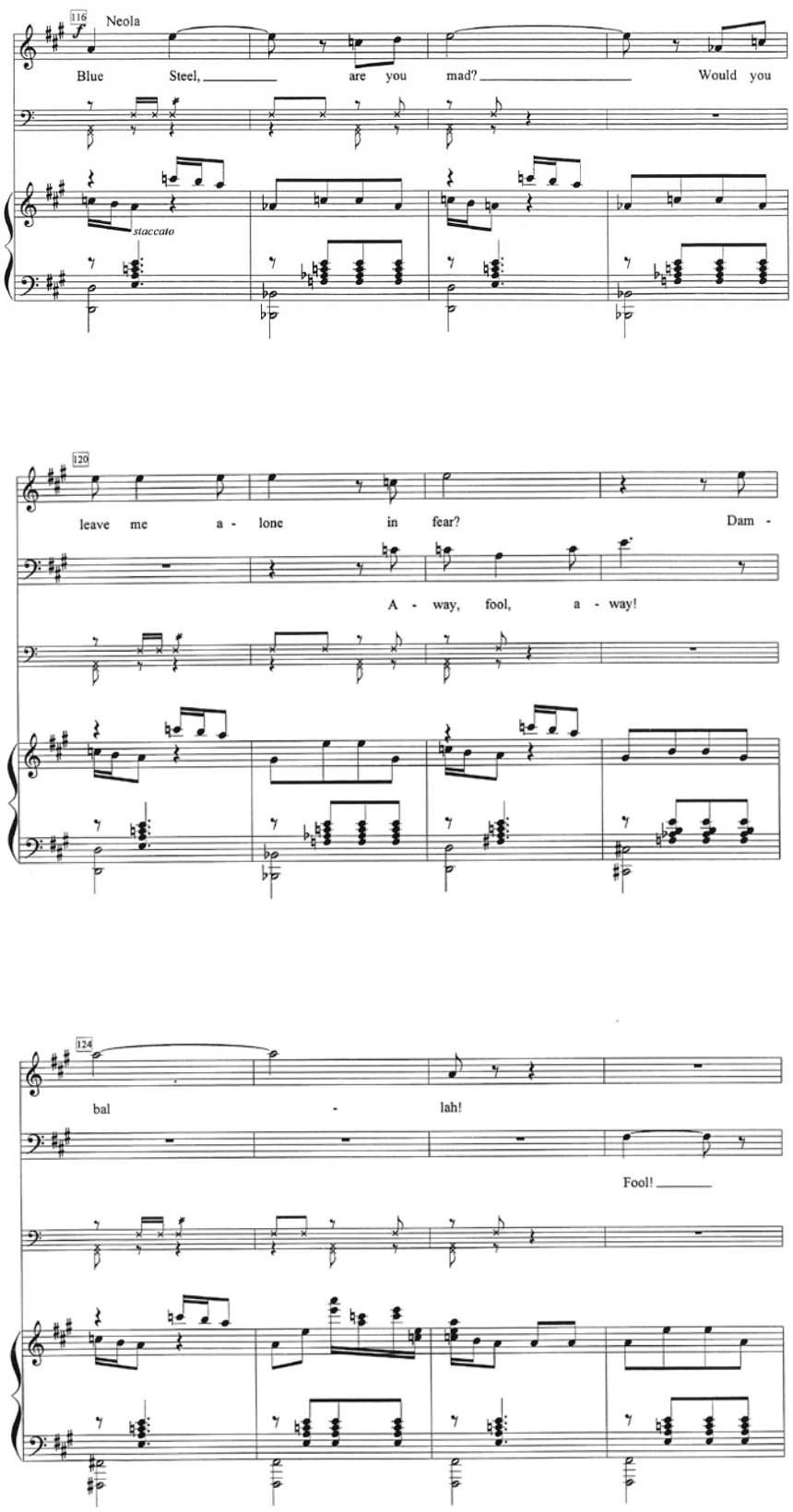


[171] Ibid., 19.

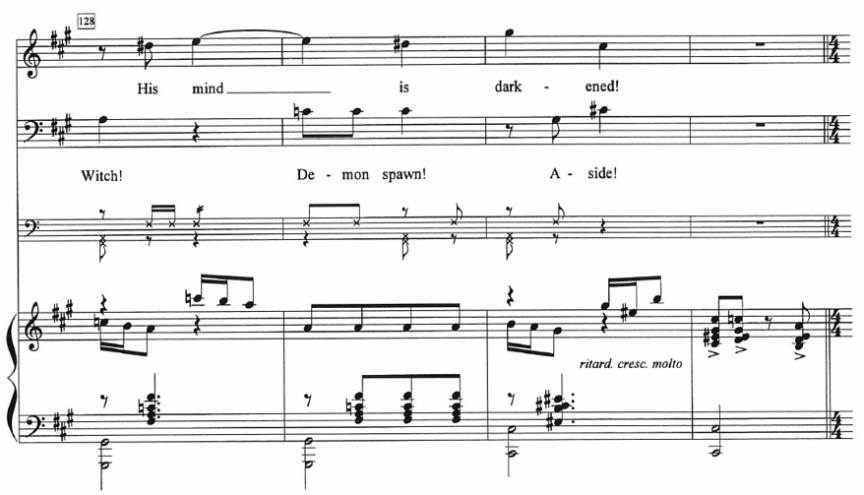
Example 2. William Grant Still, “The Drums Weave the Spell of Death” from *Blue Steel*, mm. 50–64.



Example 3. William Grant Still, “The Drums Weave the Spell of Death” from *Blue Steel*, mm. 116–131.



Example 3, cont.



Pan-African Themes in the Music of *Blue Steel*

The overall structure of *Blue Steel* is typical of late nineteenth-century opera.[172] It consists of three acts divided into recitatives, arias, duets, choruses, and orchestral features and includes a ballet in Act Two. Although structurally this opera is comparable to many other operas composed around the same time, Still incorporates a distinctly African-American message. Three numbers from *Blue Steel* that illustrate his "mastery of form" are Neola's aria, "Give Me No Body without Your Soul" (Act One), the chorus "Mighty the Hand That Gives New Life," and the subsequent ballet, "Procession and Sacrificial Dance" (both in Act Two).

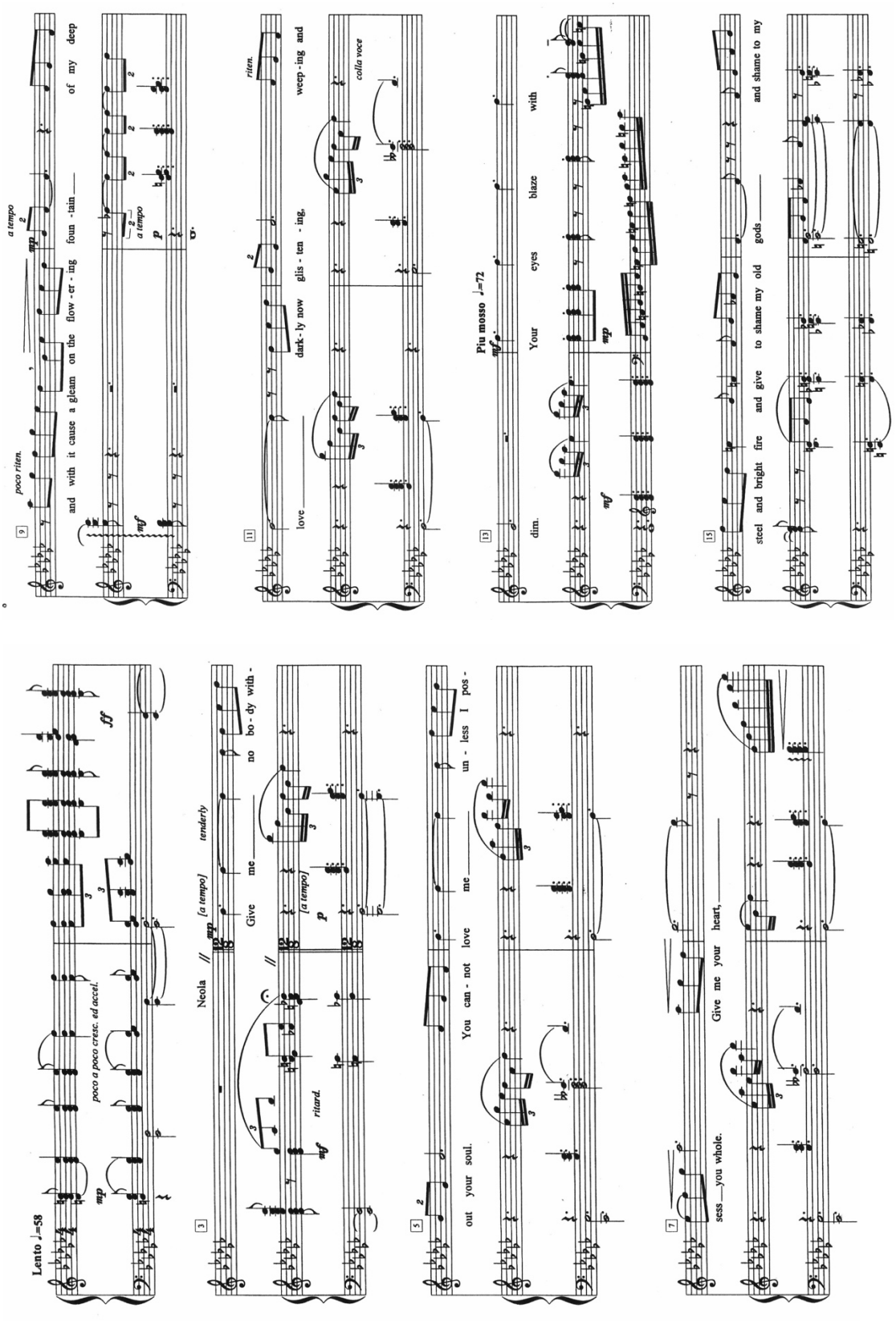
"Give Me No Body without Your Soul" is essentially a traditional da capo aria in which Still highlights Neola's uneasiness about running away with Blue Steel. As suggested by the title, Neola is not interested in pursuing a life with Blue Steel unless he

[172] For more on the nuances of nineteenth century opera see Nicholas Baragwanath, *The Italian Traditions and Puccini: Compositional Theory and Practice in Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011).

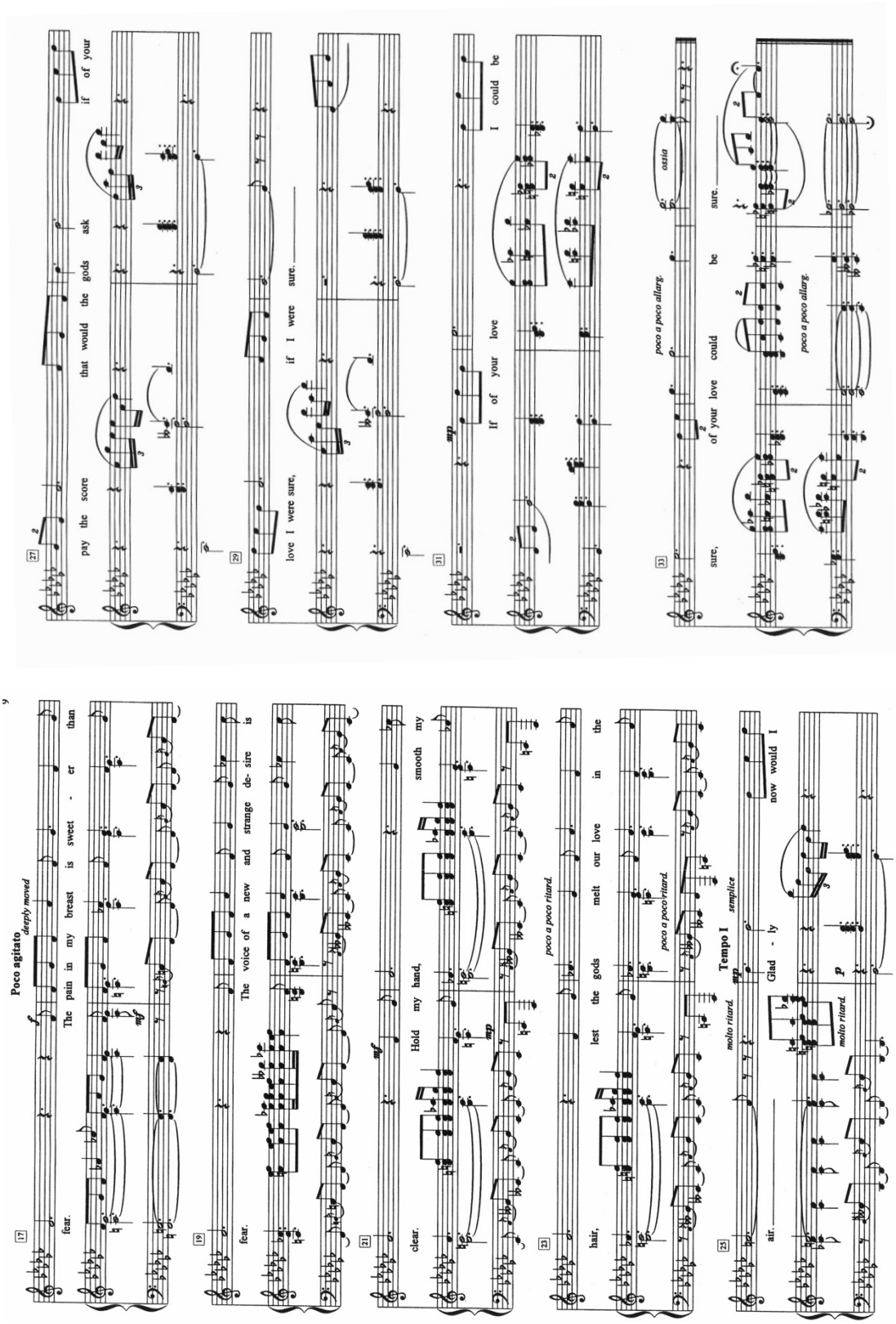
loves her whole, body and soul. This would require his acceptance of his heritage. The A section is intended to be sung tenderly as Neola pleads to Blue Steel. With him whole, her own self-consciousness can be realized, causing a "gleam on the flowering fountain of [her] deep love," which is at the moment is "weeping and dim," perhaps because it is lacking modernity (Example 4). The B section builds on this internal conflict and embodies Neola's struggle with the acceptance of modernity. She speaks of how the fire in Blue Steel's eyes "shame [her] old gods" and how "the voice of a new desire is clear" in mm. 14–21. Although she is seemingly ready to take that step with her words, Still reflects her internal struggle and turmoil musically with a faster tempo and ascending chromatic scale at m. 14 followed by a marking of poco agitato with a more active accompaniment at m. 18.

As the A' section returns, beginning at m. 26, Neola expresses her uncertainty about Blue Steel with the varied statements of "if of your love I were sure" that close the aria. Traditionally when characters in operas repeat lines, or varied statements of a line, it is for emphasis. Neola's repetition and the melodic contour of her line emphasize her uneasiness. Her first statement moves up and down in conjunct, stepwise motion (mm. 28–30), but her second statement moves by thirds and a fourth (mm. 31–33). This disjunct motion indicates her eagerness to know if Blue Steel's love is serious. The last statement (mm. 33–35) highlights her vexation with her current situation by ending on a high D, her highest note in the aria. The da capo aria is used to express Neola's struggle with double consciousness because its form lends itself to introspection. This aria shares Neola's desire to be with Blue Steel and her turmoil, which reflects the broader African-American struggle of the time: wanting to love a home that does not seem to fully love you back.

Example 4. William Grant Still, “Give Me No Body without Your Soul” from *Blue Steel*.



Example 4, cont.



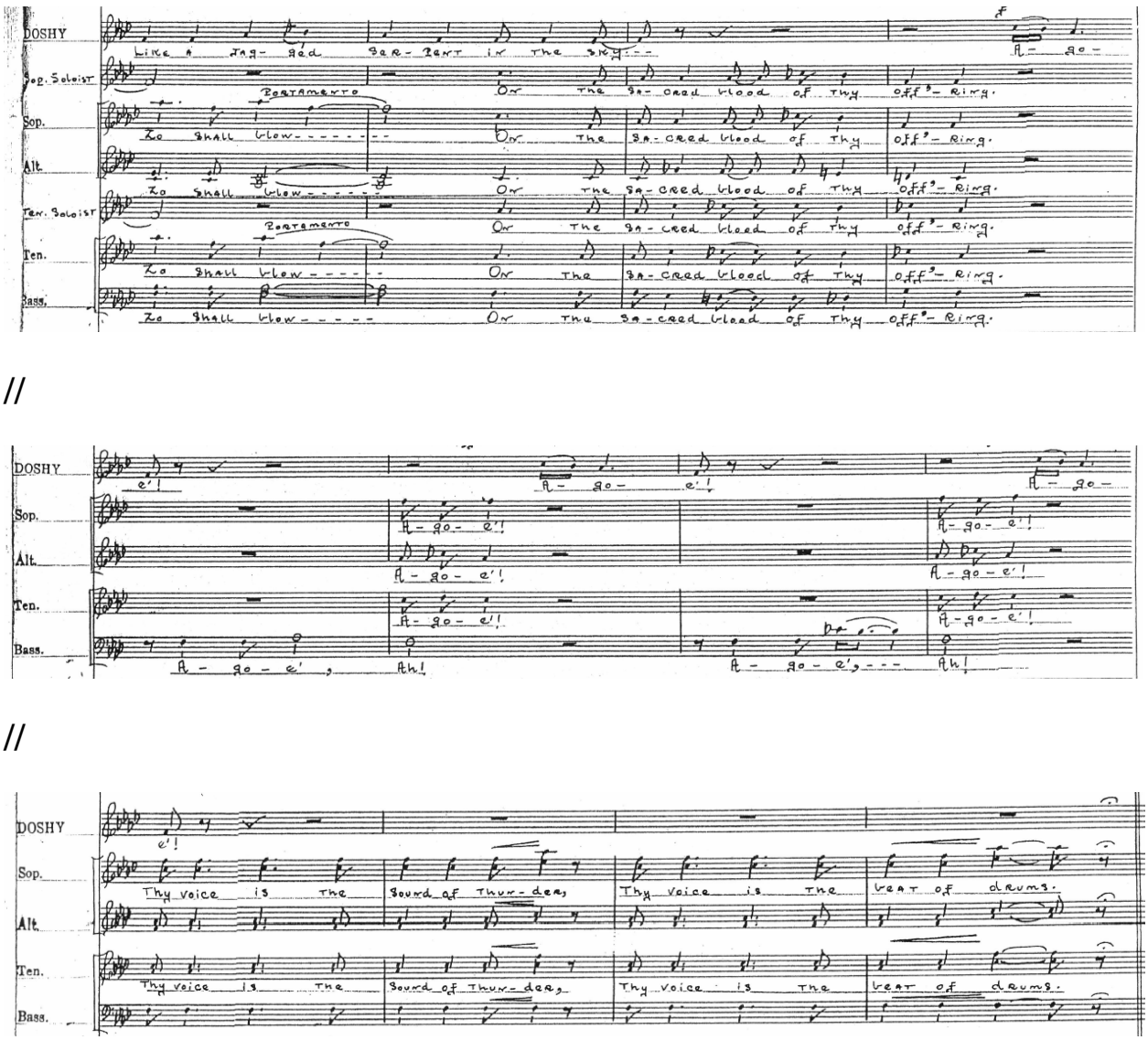
Small- and large-scale forms in the opera are relatively traditional, but Still's contemporaries were especially struck by his "use of color," "welding of thematic material," and "piquant, bizarrely scored music" in this work (based either on having heard excerpts of it performed or having read the score).[173] No part of the opera reflects these qualities more than chorus and ballet scenes from Act 2. Each of these scenes meld Pan-African themes within the Western European tradition through stylistic choices and the use of special instruments, thus demonstrating Still's mastery of form.

The chorus "Mighty the Hand that Gives New Life" is intended to imitate a voodoo incantation. As the cult prepares for the Ceremony of Renewal, Doshy leads them in prayer. In the call and response style that is a crucial African carryover, Doshy and the cult call on the spirit of Damballah and on other gods to come and renew them. Example 5 shows how Still utilizes call and response, with Doshy and the basses calling and the rest of the chorus responding. He also incorporates a wailing figure in the bass section, which adds variety to this mainly homophonic section. The use of the flatted fifth, the third measure of the second system shown in Example 5 adds additional color to the wailing figure. Still further connects this scene to a specifically African incantation by including a slap stick and asking the chorus to clap at rehearsal 65 as the praying grows in intensity.[174] The slap stick and clapping emphasize the weak beats (2 and 4), an African rhythmic crossover.[175] The increased use of specifically African-inspired percussion further

[173] Carolyn Reichard, "The Concert," *Rochester Times-Union*, April 4, 1935.; Stewart B. Sabin, "Little Symphony Has Capacity Audience," *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*, April 4, 1935.
[174] The hand copied score is available through William Grant Still Music. William Grant Still, *Blue Steel*, (Flagstaff: William Grant Still Music, 1934).
[175] For more on African and African American rhythms see Tanya Y. Price, "Rhythms of Culture: Djembe and African Memory in African-American Cultural Traditions," *Black Music Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2013): 227–247.; John M. Chernoff, "The Rhythmic Medium in African Music," *New Literary History* 22, no. 4 (Autumn 1991): 1093–1102.

indicates the scene's African ties. Beginning at rehearsal 62, Doshy sways rhythmically to the beat, an action reminiscent of those who participate in voodoo ceremonies.[176] As the incantation comes to an end, the music slows down, giving way to the ballet.

Example 5. William Grant Still, "Mighty the Hand that Gives New Life" from *Blue Steel*, vocal parts beginning four measures after rehearsal 65.



[176] For more on the use of dance in Voodoo ceremonies see Yvonne Daniel, "The Potency of Dance: A Haitian Examination," *The Black Scholar* 11, no. 8 (November/December 1980): 61–73; Allison E. Francis, "Serving the Spirit of the Dance: A Study of Jean-Léon Destiné, Lina Mathon Blanchet, and Haitian Folkloric Traditions," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 15 no. 1/2 (Spring/Fall 2009): 304–315.

The ballet tells the story of the opera on a smaller scale. There are four characters, a Maiden representing the people and three other characters representing Sacrifice, Purity, and Death. At rehearsal 70 Still changes the meter to 3/4, a traditional dance meter, as the maiden beings to perform a dance representing the joy of living, accompanied by the woodwinds and strings, and most interestingly a gourd, a traditional African instrument, repeatedly playing a quarter note on one and subdividing beat three into two eighth notes. The use of this instrument further strengthens the reading of this Maiden's representation of black peoples.[177] Death soon begins to approach her. In her fear, the Maiden appeals to Sacrifice, but Sacrifice alone cannot stop Death. The Maiden then appeals to Purity, who is accompanied by the brass, but Purity alone cannot thwart Death. However, when Purity and Sacrifice interpose themselves together between Death and the Maiden, they finally have the strength to dispel the danger of Death. Beginning at the Allegro three measures after rehearsal 77, Still utilizes the entire orchestra—woodwinds, strings, and brass—to reinforce the idea that the two figures had to work together to combat Death. The story and Still's music show that Sacrifice—the sacrifice of slave ancestors—and Purity—the culture and people born out of slavery in their American home—should entwine and reconcile to provide African Americans a better chance at life. Still uses the ballet to further emphasize the reconciliation of both halves of African American's double consciousness. This ballet is used not as mere spectacle, but as another way to communicate the message within the opera.

[177] For more on the gourd see Fred T. Smith, "The Essential Gourd: Art and History in Northeastern Nigeria," *African Arts* 19, no. 4 (August 1986): 74.; E. M. Von Hornbostel, "The Ethnology of African Sound-Instruments (Continued)," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 6, no. 3 (July 1933): 277–311.

Conclusion: Still's Mastery of Form

William Grant Still was able to create an opera that blended the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance into the European art form of opera. These ideals assisted Still in changing how blackness was viewed in opera by emphasizing the psychology of blackness, its double consciousness, rather than the blackness of the character. *Blue Steel* is thus Still's example of mastery of the opera art form. Still's message, the examination of double consciousness and the importance of African Americans reconnecting with their African heritage, is presented in a way that does not perpetuate negative stereotypes. In the character of Doshy, he provides a moral compass that holds all the characters to the same standard. Blue Steel, the antihero and the "other" of this opera, falls under the same umbrella as Berg's Wozzeck and Britten's Peter Grimes. In the end, unlike Porgy and Jonny, he answers for all his wrongdoings.

In this way, Still lifts the veil—both visually and psychologically—as the audience is now able to understand blackness in a way it never before presented in opera or on stage. Visually, the veil is lifted because all the characters are black, making the visual appearance of otherness unapparent and thus unlike Porgy's disabilities and Jonny's race in relation to other characters. Psychologically, the veil is lifted as white and black audiences are able to view the experience of what it is like to be black—the struggle with the feeling of twoness—through witnessing the complex interactions between Blue Steel, Venable, Neola, and Doshy.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The struggle for socio-political equality was perhaps one of the biggest issues facing the African-American community after the Civil War. Despite discouraging systems that were in place to keep them in a secondary citizenship position, African Americans were determined to find and fight for their rightful place in society, disproving the negative stereotypes applied to them. As Houston A. Baker establishes in his article "Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance," African Americans were best able to be "effectively articulate" and communicate progressive messages by assuming a stance in relation to "white American form[s]."[178] Harlem Renaissance leaders created unique African-American art forms by melding African-American and Pan-African culture into white American and European traditions. These forms were intended to encourage positive representations of black peoples and their experience. As Alain Locke writes:

> Music and poetry, and to an extent the dance, have been the predominant arts of the American Negro. This is an emphasis quite different from that of the African cultures…Africa…Except then in his remarkable carry-over of the rhythmic gift, there is little evidence of any direct connection of the American Negro with his ancestral arts. But…the American Negro brought over as an emotional inheritance a deep-seated aesthetic endowment. And with a versatility of a very high order, this offshoot of the African spirit blended itself in with entirely different culture elements and blossomed in strange new forms.[179]

The possibility of the arts to offer both an opportunity for white Americans to receive a better understanding of African Americans and the reconciliation between both halves of African Americans' double consciousness was exciting new territory to explore.

William Grant Still's *Blue Steel,* in regards to the last statement, becomes not only of musical importance, but of social importance as it embodies the ideals of the Harlem

[178] Baker, "Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance," 93.
[179] Alain Locke, "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts," in The New Negro: An Interpretation," 254.

Renaissance. Therefore, this study is relevant as much to musical scholarship as it is to African-American studies. On a musical level, Still's ability to incorporate authentic Pan-African themes and musical idioms in a sophisticated and purposeful manner was different than what his white counterparts were doing. His delicate handling of these items served to show appreciation instead of appropriation. Still wanted to reflect the beauty of the African arts. Primitivism, as Murchison notes, was not an option for Still, Moss, and Forsythe as they sought to avoid any demeaning representation or perpetuation negative stereotypes of African Americans.[180] With regard to African-American studies, *Blue Steel* embodies the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance but has not yet been fully considered in relation to it.[181] An African-American composer's ability to meld Pan-African themes into a highly reverenced and white-dominated art form made a statement and proved the worth of a culture dismissed as undeserving of true consideration.

The importance of this study is further evident in how *Blue Steel* contributes to our understanding of double consciousness, in Still's ability to change how blackness was presented in opera, and in his contribution to a budding African-American opera tradition. Opera, as a living art, presented Still with the opportunity to present a message he and his fellow African Americans could relate to. By providing a moral compass with which white audiences would be familiar within the opera tradition, Still temporarily lifts the veil, not only providing a new reading for black characters, but also a deeper understanding of African Americans' twoness.

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[180] Murchison, "New Paradigms in William Grant Still's *Blue Steel*," 157.

[181] Murchison has addressed William Grant Still's incorporation of the ideals of the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro Movement in his music, but not specifically in relation to *Blue Steel*. See Gayle Murchison "'Dean of Afro-American Composers' or 'Harlem Renaissance Man': The New Negro and the Musical Poetics of William Grant Still," in *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* ed. Catherine Parsons Smith (Berkley: University of California Press, 2000).

Blue Steel, despite its significance to the opera tradition and potential impact on social relations, remains un-staged. This opera deserves to be staged, in part because it would allow African American performers opportunities to play roles that depict them in a positive light and that they have an inherent level of familiarity with. The benefits of staging this opera would also extend past the performers to the audience. As mentioned in previous chapters, the fascination with blackness over the centuries has been appeased with negative representations, contributing to the misunderstanding of black peoples. *Blue Steel* lifts that veil, offering a teaching moment to those who seek to know of and understand the black experience. This study is most important as it serves to tap into a type of music that is typically ignored academically: African-American opera. While there is some scholarly work on African-American operas, the amount is highly disproportionate to work on operas written by white composers.

While the music of operas is what many walk away with after a performance, it is great stories that resonate with our humanity and that last forever. William Grant Still's *Blue Steel* accomplishes this. The fact this story, as well as those of other African-American composers of opera, are not being shared by opera companies puzzles me. In Carolyn Quin's "Biographical Sketch of William Grant Still" she speaks to the fact that Still wanted to make a significant impact and contribute great works to the operatic repertoire; however, it is in this genre that his works have been "most neglected."[182] She goes on to say that "any hope of evaluating his achievements in that field rests with the future." [183] Soll's book begins work toward that future, and I seek to further it.

[182] Judith Anne Still, Michael J. Dabrishus, and Carolyn L. Quin, *William Grant Still: A Bio-Bibliography*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996), 41.
[183] Ibid., 41.

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